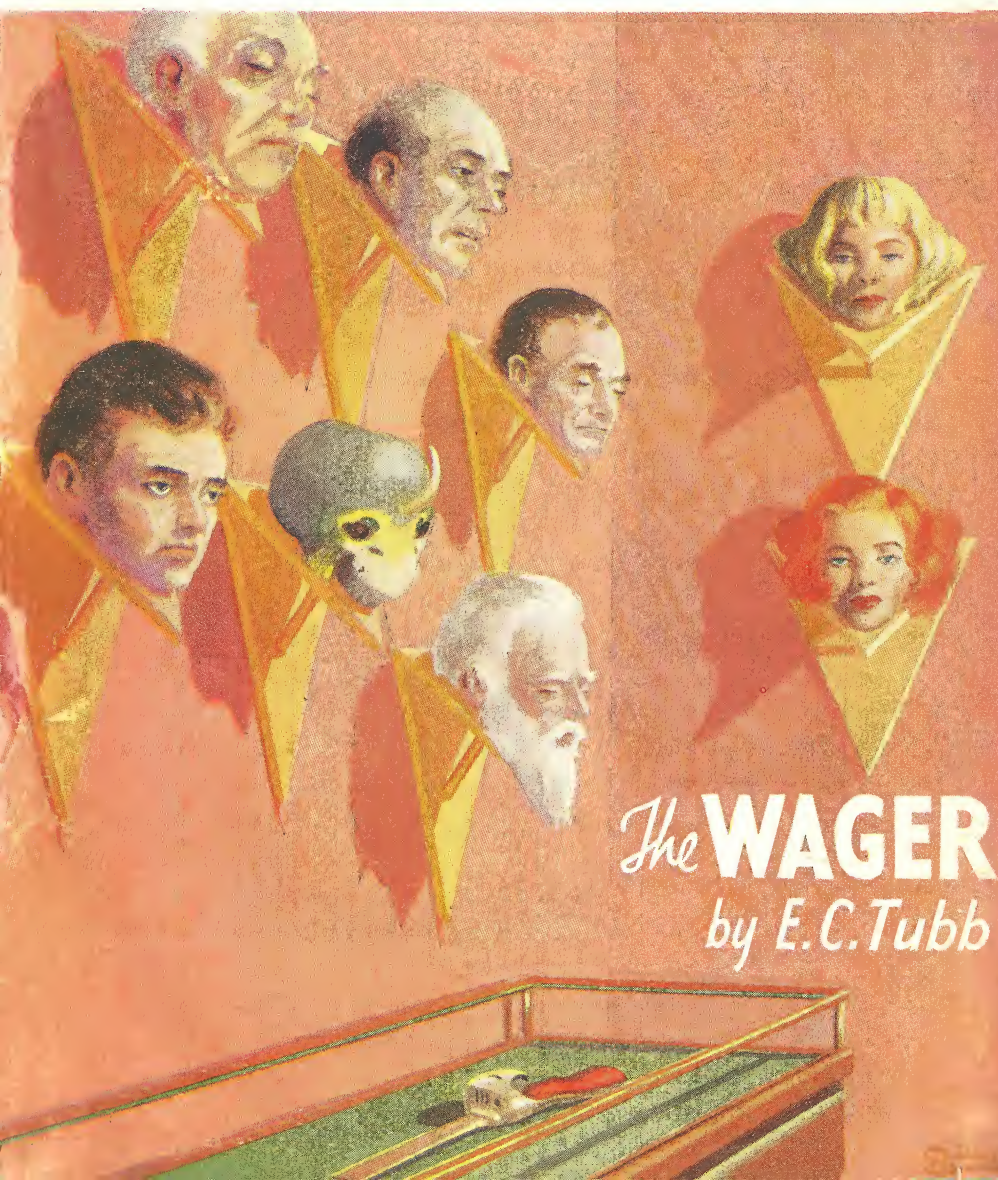


Science Fantasy

No. 16

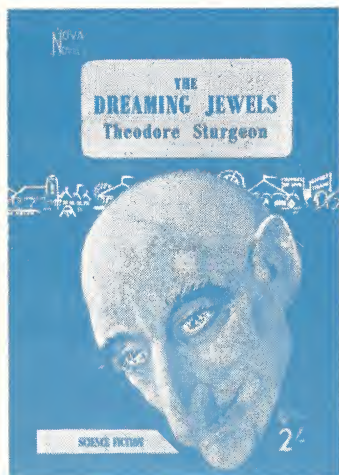
VOLUME 5

2/-



The **WAGER**
by *E.C. Tubb*

NOW ON SALE



The next two
NOVA NOVELS



The DREAMING JEWELS

by Theodore Sturgeon

JACK OF EAGLES

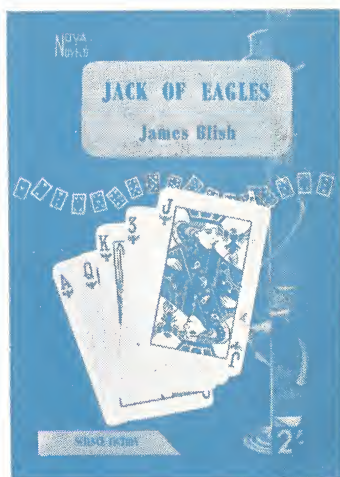
by James Blish

Two more out-
standing novels
by popular
American Authors

2/-

EACH

Published for the
first time in Britain



NOVA PUBLICATIONS

DERWENT HOUSE, 2, ARUNDEL STREET, LONDON, W.C.2.

Science Fantasy

Vol. 6 No. 16

1955

CONTENTS

● Novelette

THE WAGER E. C. Tubb 2

● Short Stories

DEATH DO US PART John Brunner 37

HOUNDED DOWN John Kippax 50

THE MINDWORM C. M. Kornbluth 63

THE EDITOR REGRETS Duncan Lamont 75

HEART'S DESIRE Niall Wilde 84

UNCLE BUNO William F. Temple 89

IT'S A GOOD LIFE Jerome Bixby 111

Editor : JOHN CARNELL

Cover by QUINN

Illustrations by Quinn and Hunter

Cover painting from "The Wager"

TWO SHILLINGS

In the United States of America, 35 cents.

Subscription rates :

Great Britain and the Commonwealth, 6 issues 13/- post free

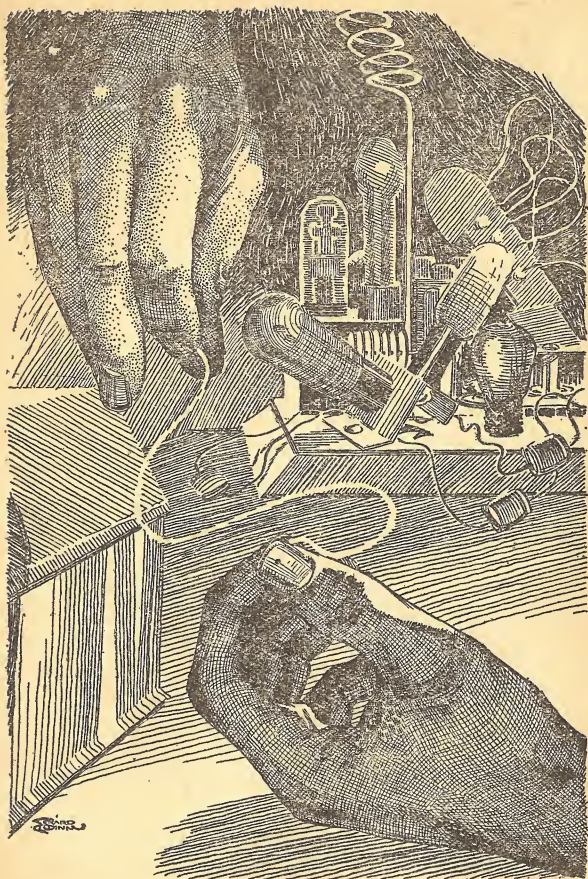
United States of America, 5 issues \$1.75 post free

The contents of this magazine are protected by copyright and must not be produced without permission of the publishers. All characters, names and incidents in stories are entirely fictitious. No responsibility is accepted for material submitted for publication, and return postage must be enclosed.

Published Bi-monthly by

NOVA PUBLICATIONS LTD., DERWENT HOUSE, 2 ARUNDEL STREET
LONDON, W.C.2.

Telephone : COVent Garden 1811



Author Tubb is at his best with the novelette and in the following dramatic example he has combined the thrills of a fast-paced detective story with the chills of fantasy; a combination which inspired artist Quinn to produce the eye-catching front cover.

THE WAGER

By E. C. TUBB

Illustrated by QUINN

I.

It had been raining and the streets were still wet. The big car skidded a little as it swung around corners, the squeal of its tyres mingling with the wail of its siren. On the front of the vehicle a red spot-light flared with intermittent life while the two big headlamps signalled its coming from a mile away.

It slewed around a corner, tore down a tree-lined road, and skidded to a halt beside a huddled knot of men. Captain Tom Mason, Homicide, swung open the front door and stepped out of the faint smell of rubber and burnt petrol into the clean air of the rain-washed night.

"Stick around," he said to the driver. "If anything comes over the radio let me know." He turned as a man walked towards him. "Clancy?"

"Yes, sir." The uniformed policeman touched the peak of his cap. "You made good time, Captain."

"Nine minutes." Mason didn't look at his watch. "The rest of the boys here?"

"Yes, sir. They got here about three minutes ago."

"I was on the other side of town." Mason hunched the collar of his shabby raincoat higher around his neck. "Did you find the body?"

"Yes, sir. You want to see it?"

"Later. What's your story?"

"I must have missed the killer by not more than a few seconds." Clancy sounded disgusted. "I was on the regular beat, coming up Third and Vine and along Pine Avenue. I heard a yell and saw someone running. I grabbed him and he told me that he'd just seen a murder. I investigated and phoned in right away."

"Pine Avenue? That's this street, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"Where were you when you heard the yell?"

"Just coming out of Third and Vine. About a hundred yards down the avenue. I ran straight here."

"And the witness?"

"I've got him. You want to see him?"

"Later. Did you see anything else? Hear anything?"

"No, sir. The night was quiet, we don't get much noise in this section, and the yell was all I heard." Clancy shifted on his feet. "It's pretty dark along here, the Avenue is only built up along one side, but I didn't see anything."

"Not surprising." Mason stared towards the huddle of men. Flashbulbs flickered like summer lightning and, from the distance, he heard the straining engine of a car. He looked at the officer.

"When the reporters get here keep them off my neck. Tell them I'll have a statement for them later. They can get it at Headquarters." He smiled thinly at the officer's expression. "Don't worry, Clancy, you'll get your picture in the papers."

"That doesn't interest me, sir."

"No? Then you're the first cop I've met it doesn't." He looked around as the driver of his car came towards him.

"Reports from the road-blocks, sir. They're holding four suspects."

"Good. Have them brought here to me. Tell the patrols to search this area. Stop and question everyone they see. Take names and addresses, identification, the usual thing. Hold everyone who cannot or will not account for himself." He waited until the man had returned to the car and then stepped towards the huddled knot of men.

Prentice, his assistant, came towards him. "Almost finished, Tom. Want the details?"

"Yes."

"The deceased is a Roger Gorman. About forty-five. Well dressed and wearing a light gabardine raincoat. Gloves, stick, soft

hat, ring on the little finger of his left hand, gold wrist watch, fat wallet. You get the picture?"

"Yes."

"Cards in the wallet says that he was a member of the Prestonville Chamber of Commerce. A couple of photographs of what could be his wife and kid. Driving licence, Lodge membership cards, business cards, a hotel key, the Grand Union, some other stuff not important as yet. You can check it all later back at Headquarters."

"Get on with it," said Mason tiredly. "What else?"

"Nothing much as yet. The killer was obviously a maniac and I've sent word to check any escapes from the mental homes. I . . ."

"What makes you think he was killed by a maniac?"

"You'll see. It wasn't robbery, the wallet is intact. He was from out of town and could hardly have had local enemies. He seemed to be a decent, normal business type out for a walk before turning in. The hotel is just a few blocks from here. I've sent a man to collect his luggage."

"You've figured all this out in, how long?"

"About five minutes." Prentice looked pleased with himself. "Not bad, uh?"

"Not good either. You've been reading too much. Sherlock Holmes went out with gas lighting." He looked around. "Where's that witness Clancy told me he had?"

"Waiting in the car. You want to see him?"

"Not yet." He sighed. "I suppose I'd better look at the body now."

He moved forward, Prentice at his side, and halted beside something covered with a rubber sheet. An officer stood by it and, as he saw Mason, he stooped and lifted the sheet from what lay underneath it. Mason stared down, his face impassive, and Prentice swung the beam from a flashlight he carried onto the corpse.

"See? I told you that it was the work of a maniac."

"Or someone trying to give us that impression?" Mason didn't look at his assistant. Hardened as he was to crime and the inhumanity of man towards man, yet he had never grown to relish the sight of death. Privately he considered it to be the worse part of his job and, staring down at what lay revealed in the light of the flashlight, he found nothing to alter his opinion. It wasn't just that the man was dead, it was what has been done to the corpse.

It didn't have a head.

The witness was a human derelict stinking of cheap wine and redolent with dirt. He blinked up at Mason and ran the tip of his

tongue between snags of teeth. His clothing was damp and he looked half-numbed as though things were happening too fast for him. He didn't look towards where the body lay.

"You saw the actual murder?" Mason shivered slightly in his thin raincoat. He knew that all this questioning could have been done in the comfort of Headquarters but he had a theory that first impressions were valuable and he wanted to get all the facts before witness and suspects had time to forget or alter what they knew and had seen.

"Well," the witness seemed doubtful, "I didn't really see it. I was sitting down and heard something and when I looked up there was a man on the ground and another man was running away."

"In which direction?"

"That way." The witness pointed to the unlit side of the avenue. "He was tall and ran like he was scared or something. I was still looking after him when the cop arrived."

"Did you shout?"

"No."

"Did you make any sound at all? Did you call to the man, for example?"

"Not me."

"That sound you heard, what was it? A cry for help? A scream?"

"I don't know," said the man. He belched. "I was asleep and it must've woke me up. I saw the fellow though."

"Which one?"

"The one running away, like I told you."

"Would you know him again?"

"I don't know." The man looked cunning. "I reckon so. Witnesses get paid, don't they?"

"Not for lying," said Mason curtly. "Would you know him again if you saw him?"

"I reckon so. In this light anyway. I wouldn't know about in a room."

"It won't be in a room." Mason stared towards where Prentice was ushering four people towards him. "Stay here. Watch those people. If you recognise anyone let me know. Don't speak and don't move. Understand?"

The witness nodded and Mason walked towards the four people.

The first suspect was quickly cleared. He was a small, balding, nervous man. He plucked at Mason's sleeve and whispered something. The Captain frowned.

"Speak up. You all know why you are here. A crime has been committed and all I want to know is who you are, where you were

going, who can vouch for you. Once cleared you can go home." He looked down at the little man. "Well?"

"It's my wife, Captain. I didn't want her to know where I was. My name is Blake, Edward Blake, and I can prove where I was from nine o'clock until when the officer stopped me."

"Where were you?"

"At Madame Cormay's." The little man blushed. "You know how it is, Captain."

"I know," said Mason. He had heard of the notorious Madame Cormay. One day the vice squad was going to do the work they were paid to do and she would be put out of business. He gestured towards an officer. "Take this man and check his story. Take him home and check where he lives. You know what to do." He looked at the remaining three suspects. Two were men the third a woman. She clung to the hand of one of the men and Mason guessed that they were together.

They were and their story was simple. They were married, but not to each other, and for obvious reasons they didn't want any investigations made at their respective homes. Mason sent them off with two officers and left it to them to make up their own alibis. He stared at the remaining man.

"Your name?"

"Holden. Gort Holden."

"Address?"

"Central Plaza."

"All right, Mr. Holden. You heard what I said to the others. As you live in a hotel I'm afraid that I just can't send you home with an officer. That wouldn't prove anything. If you'll just let me know whom to contact to vouch for you I won't detain you any longer." He paused, waiting, then as the man made no move held out his hand. "Give."

"Give you what?"

"Your papers. Your wallet, identity, social security card, anything and everything which will prove to me who and what you are."

"I'm afraid that I can't do that."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't, sorry." Gort smiled and made as though to walk away. Mason stopped him, his fingers hard on the other's arm.

"Not so fast. Maybe if you see why I'm so interested in you you'll change your mind." Mason gestured to an officer. "Take this man and show him. Bring him back afterwards to me." He waited until the couple had moved off then looked towards the witness. The man grinned and nodded his head.

When Gort returned he looked pale and almost physically ill. He stood for a moment gulping at the rain-washed air and, in the light of the street lamps, his eyes looked haggard.

"You should have warned me," he said. "That man! It's horrible!"

"Sorry," Mason didn't feel regret. "That man was murdered a short while ago. The murderer was seen making his escape. We blocked all roads and are checking the vicinity and all people who fail to identify themselves. I take it that you have no serious objection to being identified?"

"By the person who saw the murderer? Of course not."

"I didn't exactly mean that," said Mason gently. "There must be someone who would vouch for you. Your employer? Your family? Your associates?"

"Naturally." Gort hesitated. "But is that necessary? Surely if you have a witness to the crime he could clear me?"

"Perhaps." In the dim light the Captain's face was enigmatic. "You have no objection if we try?"

"Of course not."

"I see." Mason turned to the witness who had approached while they were talking. "Well? Is this the man you saw?"

"Could be." The man swayed closer and Gort recoiled from the sour odour of his breath. "Yes, that's the man."

"Are you positive?"

"Well . . ." The hesitation was obvious. "The light was bad and my eyes ain't none too good, but I'd say he's the one. Same shaped head. Same height and the same colour clothing. He's your man all right."

"Impossible!" Gort thrust himself towards the witness. "You've never seen me before in your whole life. You are mistaken." He appealed to Mason. "You can't believe this man. He would say anything if he thought that it would please you."

"Maybe." Mason nodded towards an officer. "But it's eye-witness testimony against your unsupported denial. I'm afraid that I shall have to hold you for further investigation."

He turned back to the corpse as the officer led Gort away.

II.

To Gort the whole thing seemed like a wild fantasy. He sat on a hard, narrow cot in a small, concrete room and stared at a tiny patch of blue sky high against one wall. The cell was cramped, primitive, and utterly bleak to a man used to the comforts of a galactic-wide

civilisation. And the worst part of it all was that nothing he could do would save him. Intelligence, even that of a high order, couldn't combat iron bars and stone walls.

And he was beginning to doubt his own intelligence.

Arrest had meant a bath, not that that mattered, his camouflage was proof against anything but the special solvents but, at the same time, that camouflage wasn't a permanent fixture and would need touching up from time to time. He had retained the clothing he had worn at the time of the arrest and, thinking of that clothing, made him writhe with anger at his stupidity. To have worn it at all had been ridiculous. He should never have discarded his own special garments because, without them, he was helpless.

The thought of just how utter that helplessness was made him squirm.

He looked up as the door opened and Mason entered the cell. He waited until the door had been locked behind him then sat on the single chair and faced Gort.

"Well? Have you changed your mind yet?"

Gort didn't answer. He knew what the captain wanted, proof of his identity, but that very proof was the one thing he couldn't give. There wasn't a man or woman on the face of this planet who could vouch for him. There was absolutely no paper proof of his birth, education, employment, medical history, none of the thousand and one records normal to anyone living in this particular hemisphere.

"We've checked the Central Plaza and all they can tell us is that you booked in a week ago, two days before your arrest. We've searched your things without result. It isn't good enough." He paused, waiting for Gort to speak.

"What else can I do?" Gort knew the answer and knew that he couldn't help.

"I've told you that more than once," said Mason wearily. "Who are you? Where do you normally live? Where do you work? Have you any friends of good standing who can vouch for you?" He made an expressive gesture of impatience. "Don't think that I want to keep you here, I don't, but I can't release you until I know just who and what you are. Want to tell me?"

"I . . ." Gort swallowed and shook his head. The situation was impossible. The truth wouldn't be believed and, if it were, it would be the last thing he dared tell. For the first time he began to fully appreciate the warning he had been given.

"Never underestimate them," Rhubens had said. "They're ignorant, stupid, illogical but they have their own brand of native cunning. Once they get hold of an idea they never stop worrying at it

until they find an answer. It needn't be the correct answer, but they want one just the same." The commander had laughed with easy good humour. "There's no need to warn you of the females but be careful of their law enforcement. They're fanatically security-conscious and they'll disregard ethics and everything else if they become the slightest bit suspicious."

That had been eight days ago and he was only now beginning to realise what the commander had meant.

"The position," said Mason grimly, "is this. A man has been murdered in a particularly horrible way. Every other suspect in the area has been vouched for and is clear. You are the only possible suspect and, even more important, you have been identified by a witness. I hate to say this but, unless you decide to co-operate, you're heading straight for the electric chair. It's up to you to clear yourself if you want to avoid it."

"Wait a moment." Gort frowned as he tried to recall all he had learned. "Isn't there something about a man being innocent until found guilty?"

"There is," admitted the captain dryly. "But I shouldn't count on it if I were you."

"Then what about the evidence? I had no weapon. My clothes were clean and, above all, I wasn't carrying the . . ." Gort felt a recurrence of his sickness as he tried to say the word.

"The head?" Mason looked thoughtful. "That's right you weren't, were you."

"Then the evidence alone should clear me. You have no real justification for detaining me at all."

"No?" Mason shrugged. "I don't agree with you." He stared curiously at the man on the bunk. "Have you any Indian blood?"

"What?" Gort realised that he didn't know what the captain was driving at. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

"You've been here five days now and the warder tells me that you haven't shaved once during that time. Pure Indians don't have to shave, they just don't grow whiskers." Mason scrubbed at his own chin. "Lucky devils. You're a vegetarian too, aren't you?"

"I don't eat flesh," said Gort cautiously. "Is that what you mean?"

"That's right." Mason rose and stared down at his prisoner. "But you're the first vegetarian I've ever met who refuses to eat meat, fish, eggs and any product of any animal. That must account for the way you felt when you saw the body. You should have warned me that you had a weak stomach."

Gort snatched at the opportunity. "I can't stand the sight of blood," he said. "Doesn't that prove my innocence?"

"Sorry, but no." Mason banged on the door for the warder to come and let him out. "If you want to do that you'd better start talking and you'd better do it fast. Public opinion has been aroused and, if you leave it too late, you may find yourself in the position of not being believed. Think it over."

The door closed behind him and, alone once more, Gort stretched himself full-length on the bunk. The warning had been very plain. Clear yourself—or be used as a scapegoat. Desperately he racked his brains for some way out of this almost ludicrous situation. For a man who could repair an instantaneous warp-drive, who had an intelligence at least five times that of the brightest inhabitant of this world and who was a member of the Guardians, to be confined on a false accusation in a primitive jail was something he didn't like to think about.

He could hire a lawyer he supposed, they would allow him to use his money for that purpose, but a lawyer would want to know all about him and so he would be no better off. If he could get his clothing he stood a chance, Mason had said that they had been searched but the woven-in circuits and power source had been designed to avoid detection. But before he could get his clothes he would have to clear himself and . . .

Restlessly he sat up and stared at the window high above his head. With a smooth co-ordination of muscle he jumped and drew himself up so that his face was pressed against the bars. From his vantage point he could see the roof of a building opposite, a few fleecy clouds, and an expanse of clear blue sky. He stared at the sky for a long time and, somehow, the sight began to irritate him. Up there was all the help he needed or could possibly use.

But he wasn't up there.

III.

Heltin wasn't satisfied with the ship but it was the best Jelkson would provide. He wasn't satisfied with his partner either, but it was a case of take it or leave it and Heltin, with expensive tastes and a liking for the dubious pleasures of the Rim worlds, had had no choice. Now he sat in the control chair and looked at the image on the screens.

"Is that it?" San Luchin leaned over the pilot's shoulder his cat-eyes blazing with anticipation. Heltin nodded.

"That's it. The quarry planet. Are your people ready?"

"Certainly. We have arranged a most ingenious wager. You will drop us at the same point as where I obtained the last trophy. You will give us three revolutions and then pick us up again. The one who has collected the greatest number of trophies will win twenty

thousand milars." He inhaled with a peculiar sibilance. "It should be good sport."

"Don't make it too good," warned Heltin uneasily. "You've been here before and you know that these things have a civilisation of sorts. It could be that you may find yourselves in serious trouble. It isn't just a question of landing and reaping a harvest, you know. The whole object is to pit your wits and skill against the inhabitants—and get away with it." He hesitated. "Are you certain that you wouldn't prefer a more isolated area?"

"No." San Luchin was very positive. "The entire attraction of the plan is that we shall be in some personal danger. We are taking only the essential protection-equipment and must use our full skill both to obtain the trophies and to escape detection. You have a hypno-tutor for the language?"

"Yes, the reels are ready in place. I couldn't get much local currency though, you'll have to make out the best you can." Heltin adjusted the controls and the image on the screens suddenly jerked into close proximity. "Hurry up with your preparations. I don't want to hang around here longer than I have to."

"Why not? The Guardians can't spot your screens, can they?"

"I hope not," said Heltin feelingly. "That base on the moon looks awfully efficient to me."

He slid the vessel closer to the planet as his passengers familiarised themselves with the language, and, judging the time to a nicety, he landed when the sun was on the other side of the planet. Cautiously he opened the air lock and stared at the darkness outside.

A man, walking along the deserted street stared at the bulk of the ship then continued on his way. Heltin grinned, the invisibility screens were obviously doing their job and for a moment he was tempted to leave the vessel where it was rather than follow his original plan of waiting beneath the surface of one of the seas. He dismissed the notion. Even though the local inhabitants couldn't spot him, yet the Guardians might just be able to spot his radiation and, even with his altered screens, it would be wiser to shield himself with a mile of ocean. He turned as his passengers crowded towards the air lock.

San Luchin took the lead. He, like all the rest, wore something so near to the native clothing as to be unnoticeable. Each had camouflaged his personal characteristics and each carried a single offensive weapon, of a low order of efficiency and yet one ideally suited to the project in hand. Heltin watched as the five men dropped to the ground.

"Wait a minute," he said sharply. "You've forgotten something. What are you going to keep them in?"

"That is our affair," San Luchin expressed his irritation with a peculiar gesture, a tensing and clawing of the right hand. "We intend to enjoy the sport to the full and the harder we can make it the better it will be. Take off now and return for us in three revolutions."

Heltin shrugged. "It's your party. Good hunting."

They nodded and moved away as the door slid shut. Before they had cleared the immediate area the ship had flickered from view and a moment later a rush of air told that it had left. San Luchin held a quick council.

"I suggest we separate to divergent areas," he said in the newly acquired language. "Aside from force jackets we shall be defenceless and, in order to prevent interference, we shall make no attempt at personal contact until we meet here at the appointed time. Agreed?"

They nodded and moved away, each taking a route as well away from the others as possible. San Luchin watched them go then, after a moment's thought, made his way towards the centre of town.

He hummed a little as he walked, a soft, almost feral purring of the breath and his eyes, as he stared at the surrounding crowds, glowed with mounting anticipation. He had been right to insist on a three-revolution stay. He had been right to make the hunt as severe as possible. For too long now there had been no real opportunity for good sport. Even the manufactured androids were but a poor substitute for the real thing. They were good, but they could only be as good as the builders made them and, once you had built a thing, you knew its exact capabilities. These things were different. Their capabilities were unknown and might prove to be delightfully dangerous.

He restrained the subconscious movement of his hand towards the weapon beneath his jacket. Not yet. The taking of trophies would be the easy part even though it was the ultimate thrill. He could afford to wait and enjoy the pleasure of anticipation. First there were other things to attend to, the finding of a hide, the watching of the quarry, the obtaining of the cache. The humming grew louder as he stepped carefully through the crowds.

He hadn't enjoyed himself so much for years.

IV.

Captain Mason sat in his office and stared at the litter of papers before him. It was night and a desk lamp threw a broad cone of light over the scattered sheets. Reports mostly, details of a search which, so far, had proven useless. He picked up a file and began to riffle the pages looking for the thousandth time for something, he didn't know what, to give him a clue to the most publicised murder for the past ten years.

He looked up as the assistant D.A. slammed into the room and helped himself to a chair.

"Still at it, Tom?"

"Still at it." Mason sighed and accepted the cigarette the other man offered. "Thanks. Going ahead with the trial, Bob?"

"What else can we do?" Bob Shaw thumbed a lighter and lit the cigarettes. "The old man's out on a limb. The press is riding him hard and, unless he clears up this case he can kiss his chances in the coming election goodbye."

"You think that you can get a conviction?"

"It's a certainty." Bob stared at the lined face of the captain.

"What's the matter? Don't you believe that Holden did it?"

"I'm not certain he did," admitted Mason slowly. "Somehow it just doesn't add up." He picked up the file. "No motive. No weapon. No stains on his clothing. He could just have been walking down the road as he claims when we picked him up."

"You're forgetting the witness," reminded Shaw. "He's willing to swear that Holden is the man he saw running from the scene of the crime."

"That wino? Who'd believe him?"

"The jury will, and that's all that matters." Shaw dragged at his cigarette. "He broken down yet?"

"Not yet."

"That won't help him either. Playing dumb isn't the right way to prove innocence. If you've got nothing to hide then why not speak up? Quit feeling sorry for him, Tom, if he's in trouble then it's his own fault."

"Maybe." Mason sighed as he put down the file. "I'm still not happy about it though. You haven't really got a case against him at all. Any good lawyer could rip it apart and get it thrown out of court."

"You think so?" Shaw blew smoke through his nose. "I don't agree. Look, we can forget the motive angle. The dead man was a bit of a playboy and we can suggest that our friend was a little jealous or something. That part doesn't matter. The man's dead, that's all we've got to worry about, and Holden's a sitting duck to take the rap."

"Even if he's innocent?"

"Tell that to the birds. He's as guilty as hell, that's why he clammed up, he knows that as soon as he starts talking we're going to check and trip him up." Shaw stared at Mason. "Listen. He threw the knife away, that's simple, there's a big piece of waste ground right next to where the killing took place and it's got a storm drain at the end of it. He dumped his cargo too, doubled back, and then tried to make out he was only taking a walk. It was his bad luck that he was seen

by a witness and that we managed to cordon the area so soon. Five more minutes and he would have got clean away."

"And the blood?"

"Luck or . . ." Bob shrugged. "We'll settle for luck." He rose to his feet. "Did you get anywhere with his prints?"

"No. They aren't on file anywhere."

"Maybe he's a draft dodger too," suggested Bob. "Anyway, don't let it get you down, Tom. After all, what's it to you?" He left and the captain frowned down at the file again.

It was easy for Bob to talk, easier still for him to sit back and be cynical even if it sent an innocent man to the chair, but Mason couldn't forget that an officer's duty wasn't just to assume guilt, he should also help to prove innocence.

And something was wrong.

He knew it. He felt it everytime he saw the prisoner. The man wasn't insane, and what sane man would decapitate another? He wasn't even a killer, though Mason knew that any man given the right conditions could become a killer. It was something intangible, something not quite fitting into the correct groove and, the more he thought about it, the more it began to worry him.

The fingerprints for example. Holden had been printed as a matter of routine and his prints sent to the agencies for checking. That they weren't on file wasn't too extraordinary, it merely meant that he had never worked in a defence plant, been previously arrested, served with the armed forces, worked for a big company, or applied for a passport. What was extraordinary was the prints themselves.

Mason stared at them, frowning at the strange, utterly unnatural pattern. He knew that all normal prints fell into defined categories depending on the arches and whorls but Holden's were in a class by themselves. No arches, no whorls, a series of herringbone patterns overlaid by a writhing mass of circular lines, the whole blurred and distorted to an almost unrecognisable extent. It was puzzling and mentally Mason began reviewing the case against Gort.

The knife? Shaw had explained that and, if the crime had been premeditated, that was just what the murderer would have done. Motive? Unessential, it wasn't his job to prove motive. The blood? Luck as Shaw had said, or . . .?

The blood!

Hastily Mason thumbed through the file until he found what he was looking for, an eight by ten blow-up of the scene of the crime. He squinted at it, something nagging at his brain then, with quick impatience, flipped the switch on an intercom.

"Desk? Mason here. Get me Doc Wheelan." He waited, fingers drumming on the edge of his desk. "Doc? Mason here. How much blood does a body contain?" He frowned at the sounds coming from the speaker. "No, I'm not joking, this could be serious." He listened again. "That much? If someone were to slash off a head would it all spurt out? Most of it? Depends? Look, you know the case I'm working on, well, as far as I can tell from the photographs there was hardly any blood at all. How do you account for that?" He listened again. "O.K. O.K., so I didn't notice it at the time. Hell, Doc, it was raining, the night was dark and I had other things on my mind. The report? No, I didn't read it, why should I have done? The man was dead, wasn't he, and even I could see the cause. Can you boil it down?" Mason's face hardened as he listened to the voice from the speaker. "Are you certain? You are? O.K., Doc, keep your shirt on. I only wanted to know."

Slowly he broke the connection, his face heavy with thought then, abruptly, he threw the switch again.

"Desk? Mason here. Bring down the prisoner Gort Holden. Bring him down right away."

He waited, staring down at the photograph, the crease between his eyes a living question mark.

The simplicity of it was such that Gort felt utterly ashamed of not having thought of it before. In order to escape he needed his special clothing so, as he was still not in prison garb and wouldn't be until after the trial, he deliberately destroyed the clothes he was wearing. The warder had shrugged when he saw the wreckage and, as the prisoner had more clothes of his own, what was simpler than to fetch them?

It was as easy as that.

Dressed once more in his protective clothing Gort felt a new man. He sat on the edge of the bunk and wondered just what would be best for him to do. He could slice out the bars of the window and float out to freedom. He could cut the lock from the door and get out that way. He could generate the force-field which would protect him from all missile and most energy weapons and nothing these people could do would stop him. He could also trip the emergency signal and call to the base for help.

But to do any of these things would be both an admission of failure and betrayal of his trust.

First, he had aroused enough suspicion as it was without arousing more. Calling for help now was both unnecessary and unjustified and, if he did, he would have some awkward questions to answer when he



got back to base. A Guardian, even a young one, was supposed to be able to use his own initiative. Sitting on the edge of the bunk he decided to do nothing for the time being. Being able to escape any time he wanted to made all the difference and, even though he didn't like to admit it, his recent experience had taught him a lot.

It had taught him that a man was only as good as his technology. Even with his high intelligence, his so-called superiority over these primitives, yet he had been helpless without his gadgets. In a way he'd been even worse than the natives because they didn't tend to rely on force-fields and all the other appurtenances common to his own civilisation. It was a sobering thought and he was still brooding over it when the warder came to take him to Mason.

The captain wasted no time.

"There's something funny about you Holden and I want to know what it is. There's another matter too . . ." His voice trailed off as he glanced at the photograph. "But never mind that for now." He dropped the glossy print and gestured to a chair. "Sit down."

Gort sat down. Strangely enough he didn't feel in the slightest bit upset. Maybe it was because he now knew himself to be invulnerable or it may have been that, for the first time since his arrest, he was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Do you still refuse to give me data about yourself?" Mason asked the question as though he didn't really expect an answer and, for a moment, Gort was tempted to tell him the truth. He resisted the insane impulse, this was no time for joking.

"I do."

"Then let me tell you something about yourself." Mason relaxed in his chair and stared at his prisoner. "You may not have known it but you've been under constant surveillance since your arrest. For example we know that you have never once shaved. You have never eaten any product of any dead or living animal and, as far as we can determine, you have never slept." He stared thoughtfully at Gort. "Another thing, your finger prints aren't normal. I have never seen a pattern like them before and I think that it's safe to say another such pattern does not exist." He leaned forward his eyes suspicious.

"*What are you, Holden?*"

Not who, *what* ! The significance of the word sent a chill up Gort's spine. Mason was suspicious, maybe it was only the vague glimmerings of an idea as yet but, remembering Rhubens' advice, Gort knew that he dared take no chances. He smiled.

"What? You mean who, don't you?"

"Perhaps." Mason didn't elaborate. "Are you going to talk?"

"I can tell you a few things," said Gort. "I don't know why I have no need to shave. I've never thought about it before, it's just one of those things, you know how it is."

"Do I?"

"Well, you said yourself that Indians never had to shave so what's so peculiar about it?" Gort gestured with his hands. "I'm a vegetarian, yes, I've never denied it but that's no crime. I just don't like eating dead tissue or the products of living organisms. I may be fanatical on the subject but my stomach's my own."

"And the sleeplessness?"

"That's nonsense," lied Gort. "I sleep just the same as anyone else but I've trained myself to take my rest in snatches. I'll drop off for ten minutes or half an hour, wake up for a few minutes, then drop off again." He smiled. "I've got a theory about it."

Mason didn't smile. "You still haven't told me anything," he reminded. "Do you want to be tried for murder?"

"You won't convict me," said Gort positively. "I'm innocent." He looked at the photograph. "Is that the scene of the crime?"

"Yes," Mason picked it up, hesitated, then handed it to Gort. "You might be able to help me. When you saw the body did you notice any blood?"

"Blood?" Gort paused, the photograph in his hand. "I can't remember, is it important?"

"It could be," said Mason seriously. "Something odd has come up and I want to be certain that I'm right. If you could remember it would help a lot."

Gort nodded and threw his mind back to recall the incident. He concentrated and suddenly, he could smell the rain-wet night, hear the soft sounds made by the shoes of the men, see the huddled and headless figure sprawled on the grass. He controlled his revulsion and forced himself to scan the area.

"There was a little blood at the upper limit of the corpse," he said carefully. "Is that what you want to know?"

"How much blood?" Then, as Gort hesitated. "A smear or two, a pint, a gallon? Was the grass covered with it or was it only in one small area?"

"There wasn't a lot. Just a heavy smear on the grass."

"Yes," said Mason heavily. "That's what I thought." He stared at Gort. "I've just read the medical report and spoken to the doctor. It appears that the head was removed with an incredibly sharp instrument which apparently had the power to cauterise the wound as it cut. The single smear of blood apparently came from a minor wound caused after death. I use the word 'apparent' because, as far as we know, no such instrument exists." He paused and stared at Gort. "Just as fingerprints such as yours do not exist."

"But they do," said Gort and held up his hands. "I have them."

"Exactly." Mason reached for his intercom. "You needn't worry about being put on trial for murder. I am going to inform Security and you will be held for further questioning. I'm sorry, Holden, but you realise that I cannot chance the fact that you may be a spy."

The phone jangled just as he was about to speak and, with an irritated expression, he lifted the receiver. "Mason here. What is it?"

Watching him Gort could see his expression change from irritation to incredulity. "What! Three of them? Where?" He listened, one hand making swift notations on the pad before him. "All without heads? Wait! Any blood? You don't know? Check on it then, and hurry!"

His eyes met those of Gort and, as if the sight had reminded him of something, he reached again for the intercom. The squawking of the phone interrupted him for a second time.

"No blood? Are you positive? Good. Yes, I'll be right over. Yes, looks like the same man at work again. Cordon the area and proceed as usual."

Mason slammed down the receiver, reached for the intercom, then slumped in sudden immobility.

Gort rose. He had about half a minute to make his escape, the paralysis wouldn't last longer than that for fear of causing death, but before he went he had something to do. Quickly he wiped the photograph, took the officer's wallet card from his pocket and, with easy strides, moved towards the door.

A second application of the paralysis vibration cleared his path and, before Mason could recover, he was in the street and on his way to freedom. Almost he felt sorry for the captain but what else could he have done? A more rigorous confinement would have necessitated the loss of his protective clothing and all hope of escape. As it was he had merely walked out leaving unanswered questions. Mason, no matter what his suspicions, couldn't now verify them.

Gort was free to continue his interrupted vacation.

V.

San Luchin sat in his hotel room and trembled as he listened to the newscast. The fools! The unutterable fools to have gone trophy hunting so soon after arrival. And yet, fools though they were, their action had made the hunt even more exciting.

A large-scale map of the city was spread before him on the floor and he scanned it, marking the areas where the bodies had been found, his cat-eyes blazing with interest as he extrapolated the probable results of the mistimed hunting. Obviously they had underestimated the resources of this planet. According to the newscast the areas were now cordoned and every person discovered within them would be questioned and examined. Equally obvious they would have to discard their trophies and, at the same time, run a risk of discovery.

He bared his teeth as he thought about it, almost envying them their position, and yet, at the same time recognising their danger. Not of personal annihilation, of course, their protective force-fields would safeguard them from that, but of their being kept so busy that they would inevitably lose the wager. Also, and this was most important, they had to avoid all unnecessary suspicion. Not that the natives

mattered, they didn't, but the watchful Guardians did and this was too fine a quarry planet for them to lose it so soon.

The foolish part had been in taking trophies where the bodies were certain to be almost immediately discovered.

Restlessly he began to pace the floor. His own plans were made, he had scanned the area, knew just where and when to strike, and even had his containers for his trophies ready and waiting. He paused beside the plastic suitcases—how strange that this race should know of plastics. Ideal for his purpose, they were light, strong, and of a size both designed for good capacity and lack of unessential bulk. He was still examining them when the knock came at the door.

"Yes?"

"Police, open up."

"One moment." Quickly he checked to make sure that his eyes were hidden by contact lenses, his camouflage perfect and his clothing adjusted. He opened the door before the uniformed officer had time to knock again.

"Can I help you?"

"You can answer some questions," snapped the officer. He was big, broad, a holstered weapon hanging at his belt and his uniform cap pushed back on his bald skull. San Luchin stared fascinatedly at that skull, mentally imagining it mounted on the wall of his trophy room, and wondered again at the incredible variety of trophies it was possible to obtain on this planet. He remembered to smile.

"Certainly. What would you like to know?"

"Where were you during the past two hours? Have you any identity? Is there anyone who can vouch for you?" The officer droned the questions and San Luchin guessed that he was merely conducting a routine investigation. He relaxed a little and reached inside his jacket for a wallet.

"Here, driver's licence, social security card, lodge membership cards and insurance policy. I'm a stranger in town, drove in on business, and I've kept pretty well to my room for the past few hours." He smiled again. "Got a touch of flu, I guess. The receptionist should be able to verify that."

"I've already checked," said the officer. He stared at the papers the wallet contained. "Sorry to trouble you Mr. Jones, but you know how it is on this job. With a maniac prowling the city we just can't be too careful." He closed the wallet and handed it back. "If you ask me this is a waste of time. Hell, anyone would know that the killer wouldn't hang around the scene of his operations. Anyway, what's the good of checking every resident just for suspicious characters?"

"It must be hard on you," sympathised San Luchin. He knew better than to be dogmatic. "Think you'll find them?"

"Them?" The officer raised his eyebrows. "Who said anything about 'them'?"

It had been a mistake but he hadn't been able to resist the deliberate provocation. A good hunter learns the reactions of his quarry and San Luchin knew himself to be a good hunter. He forced himself to look away from that tempting trophy.

"Sorry, I guess that I was getting confused. Three bodies, you know . . ." He gestured with his hands. The officer nodded.

"That's right, but there can only be one killer nutty enough to do what he did." He slid back his cap and scratched his naked scalp. "Well, guess that I'd better be getting on with the job. Goodnight, Mr. Jones."

"Goodnight." San Luchin leaned against the closed door and gulped at the thick, slightly arid air. Desperately he fought to control his reactions. Not yet! Not yet! Not yet! The thought hammered within his skull and gradually calmed the seething emotions within him. Almost he had yielded to temptation and he had a momentary glimpse of precognition. The trophy taken, then the inevitable flight, the hunt in which the hunter would be the hunted. The pitting of wits against wits, skill against skill, and all the time there would be the temptation to acquire more and more trophies. He closed his eyes and quivered in orgasmic mental pleasure.

When he opened them again he was ice calm.

The others had yielded to temptation and were now probably devoid of hides, trophies and caches. In effect they would have had to start again with the handicap of wasted time. As strangers in the city they would be suspect and . . .

He was also a stranger.

The wallet had been taken from a native he had met and killed for the single purpose of establishing his hide. The body he had hidden in thick undergrowth at the edge of the city trusting to luck that it would not be discovered and its identity established too soon. Now, because of the general suspicion, it was almost certain that very thing would happen.

The officer had been tired but these things were, in their way, remarkably efficient. He would remember the name, the foreign accent, the mistake of the word 'them.' The hotel receptionist too might begin to wonder about the strange guest who stayed close to his room. A part of his mind told him that he was worrying unnecessarily but another part, the cold, calculating hunter's part, warned him

constantly of the danger of underestimation. He was still undecided when the officer returned to his room.

This time he didn't knock, but walked straight in, and San Luchin cursed the carelessness which had made him forget to lock the door.

"What do you want?"

"Just one more question." The officer's eyes slid around the room.

"You said that you drove into town on business?"

"That's right."

"What sort of business?"

"Pedlar." San Luchin saw at once that he had chosen the wrong word. "I sell things."

"A drummer." The officer nodded. "What's your line?"

"Cases, suitcases." The cache gave its own answer. "Satisfied?"

"Sure," the officer fumbled at his notebook. "Just one other thing." He looked apologetic. "You speak sort of funny, you know, as if you might be a foreigner or something. Are you?"

"No." San Luchin searched his hypnotically acquired knowledge of the language for semantically soothing words. "I've an impediment, it plays hell with my trade, but the regular man's sick just now and I didn't want to lose a contract." Sickly he realised that he was making things worse.

"So you own the business?" The officer moved towards the telephone on the bedside table. "Good, that makes things a lot easier. I'll just check with your home town and that'll finish it. Number?"

"I've got it here," San Luchin fumbled inside his jacket and stepped closer. Now that he knew what he had to do he felt a terrible relief. Anyway, the trophy would be spectacular and, even more important, it would make the game so much more exciting.

He stepped towards the officer.

VI.

Gort could feel the tension of the city. People clustered in little knots and groups, their eyes suspicious as they stared at every passerby, and the wail of sirens echoed from the high buildings as carloads of police hurried from point to point. It was late, almost midnight, but every light was on and the main streets were brilliantly lit. Gort knew that unless he took precautions, it would only be a matter of time before he was stopped, questioned, and held for arrest. Mason must have circulated his description and every officer would be on the look out for him. He needed time to plan his next move.

An all-night restaurant flashed gaudy neon at him from across the street and he swung towards it, not feeling really at ease until the doors had swung shut behind him. The place was almost empty, a few of the high stools being occupied by morose men and blousy women, and, after a quick look round, Gort sat in one of the booths. A waiter, his pale face as tired as his apron, wiped automatically at the table and thrust forward a fly-blown menu.

"Coffee." Gort stared at the almost empty restaurant. "How's business?"

"You kidding?" The waiter scowled. "Normally the place is jumping this time of night. Late diners on their way home from the movies, transients, drifters, early-shift workers, we get 'em all. Now look at it. Much more of this and we might as well shut up for good." He moved away to fetch the order and Gort took advantage of the privacy to check the contents of the stolen wallet.

Money, not too much but enough for immediate emergencies. Some papers, an identification card, a badge, and the usual trivia most men carry about with them. The money would be useful, all that Gort had carried was probably still locked in the precinct safe together with his wrist watch, loose change, keys and other unessentials. He shrugged, he could afford to lose them, they were only local products, and he could return the wallet later. He looked up as the waiter brought his coffee.

"Thanks. What's all the fuss about?"

"Don't you know?" The waiter was too tired to think it strange and was glad of the opportunity to talk. "It's this killer that's still running around. You meant you haven't heard?"

"I'm a night-worker," explained Gort. "My radio's broken and I didn't get a paper. What's the latest?"

"He killed a copper, sliced off his head in a hotel room." The waiter shook his head. "I don't get it. That's four dead so far and all the same way." He licked his lips with morbid interest. "Four so far, all at different points of the city and all without heads. What the hell would he be wanting with a lot of heads? The guy must be way off the beam."

"In a hotel room?" Gort looked thoughtful. "They must know who he is then."

"Some lousy foreigner from what I can make out. He skipped and they're looking for him now." The waiter sucked at his teeth. "They got a description, he's an odd looking character, and if he's on the streets they'll find him." He swabbed at the table. "Something wrong with the coffee?"

"It's cold. Fetch me some more will you, without milk this time."

Alone, Gort considered what he had just heard. He had thought it odd that his escape had caused so much excitement then, as he remembered Mason's telephone conversation he began to understand. A city-wide search for an insane killer, obviously the same killer who had caused the original trouble—and he had walked out right into the middle of it.

The waiter brought the milkless coffee and Gort concentrated on some deep thinking.

The trouble was that these people were so suspicious. He could understand it, of course, all they had to go on was paper-proof and interchangeable identity, but that meant a tremendous amount of work in checking that each person was who he was supposed to be. Even documents weren't enough, personal relationships counted for much more and, unless a man had someone who could vouch for him, he could easily get into serious trouble. Gort had paper-proof, as Captain Mason he should be safe from unauthorised detection unless the person checking him knew the captain personally. Or, no, every policeman would have been warned of the stolen papers so, in a way, he was no better off. For a moment Gort toyed with the idea of stealing someone else's papers then, almost at once, dismissed the notion. Self-preservation was one thing but deliberate, unnecessary crime was something else. And anyway, he had no money.

Like it or not it seemed that he would have to terminate his vacation.

He didn't want to, he had been enjoying himself and he didn't know when the opportunity would arise again for a holiday on this particular world. Educationally it had little to offer, in effect it served as an example of what a civilised world was not, and, even though he had quite a long life ahead of him, yet there were still many more worlds to see. Even Rhubens who had been stationed at the moon base for the past twenty periods had only been down once because, as he said, the stultifying effects were too grave to risk more often. Sitting at the table staring at the brown liquid before him, Gort could agree with the commander. He felt almost stupid, his brain working only with a tremendous effort, and it was quite possible that, if he stayed too long, he might seriously impare his faculties.

Which was one of the reasons why Earth was in such strict quarantine.

The waiter was hovering around again, perhaps waiting for a chance to engage in conversation or perhaps because he was suspicious. Gort rose, payed for the untouched coffee with one of the stolen bills, pocketed his change and stepped out into the street.

A man approached him as he neared a corner, a civilian fortunately, and Gort stopped.

"Going towards Edwards and Main, mister?"

"No." Gort had memorised a map of the city. "Eleventh and Spring. Why?"

"We're making up a party." The man gestured towards a car almost filled with men and women. "It's pretty dark that way and it could be that the killer's lurking down there. If you lived that way I'd take you home for a couple of dollars. Where did you say you were heading?"

"Eleventh and Spring."

"Then Sam could run you there." He turned and shouted towards another man. "Hey, Sam! Can you take one more?"

"It doesn't matter," said Gort hastily. "I've got some business to attend to before then. Thanks anyway."

He walked off before the man could stop him again, crossing the street and wishing he wasn't so conspicuously alone. He had better leave. He could catch a train or bus, stop off at some small, isolated place, and send out the recall signal for the ship to drop down and pick him up. Staying, while it could be exciting, could also embroil him to a dangerous extent and he didn't want to be reprimanded for immature behaviour.

It was while passing through some back streets that he first learned he was being followed.

At first it didn't register, he had become so used to the lack of contact from the people around him and, when it did, he could hardly believe it. Someone was following him but, that someone wasn't a native of this planet! He halted, keening his mind for maximum reception, and, despite the nullifying effect of the planetary field, he could catch the emissions of another mind. The man, whoever he was, had halted too and was watching Gort with an almost gloating eagerness. Obviously he didn't suspect that Gort was other than what he appeared and, very obviously, he wasn't a Guardian.

But whoever and whatever he was he shouldn't have been here at all.

Slowly Gort continued walking, part of his mind taking care of his progress while the other, greater part, attempted to solve the mystery. Behind him he could sense that the man was coming nearer and, as he approached, his mental pattern became clearer. Gort cursed the peculiarities of this planet which prevented him from using his talents, the mental impression was fogged and blurred to an incredible extent and all he could catch was a sense of hate, of fury, and an overriding, almost sickening sense of hunger.

Gort activated his force-field just as the sear-blade lashed towards the back of his neck.

For a moment there was a struggle as energy combated energy. Sparks showered from the edge of the blade then it grew hot and began to smoke. The man, apparently half-dazed from the transmitted shock, dropped the weapon as Gort swung towards him. He recoiled, his eyes reflecting his hate and, as Gort moved closer he snatched at one of the buttons on his jacket.

"Turn it off!" Gort radiated the command with the full strength of his mind and, at the same time, grabbed at the figure before him. For a moment the two fields strained in conflict then, as that of the Guardian, more powerful and with greater efficiency began to override that of the other, Gort repeated his command.

"Turn it off, you fool! Quick!"

The answer was a blast of hate followed by a quick surge of fear. Confused impressions radiated towards him then, as Gort released his hold and stepped back, smoke and fire seemed to burst from the figure. For a moment he stood, lined in flame, then, as the overloaded protective field collapsed, he slumped and dissolved in smoking ruin.

Slowly Gort stooped and picked up the useless sear-blade.

Even in the early hours the railway terminal was fairly busy and Gort felt quite safe as he sat in the waiting room and waited for the night to pass. He was glad of the security because he had a lot to think about and, the more he thought about it, the nastier it appeared.

Of course, in a way, it had been inevitable. Someone, sometime was sure to stumble on the planet, drop down for a quick look, then try to make something from what they had found. The important thing was that they had managed to do it without registering on the detector screens of the moon-based Guardians. That was serious but, even more serious, was the trail of suspicion which the visitors were leaving behind them.

Gort sighed as he tried to collate his thoughts. Normally it would have been easy. As a Guardian he was a telepath and as a telepath he was automatically a Guardian but things, on this world, weren't normal. Telepathy was non-existent here. Trying to read the minds of the natives was like trying to read the thoughts of a steel ball. It couldn't be done. Whether that was due to the unique planetary field, or whether the very barriers behind which the natives lived affected his faculties, Gort didn't know, but the fact remained that, unless a broadcaster was right next to him, his ability was useless.

And there was more than just the one.

He relaxed and closed his eyes in pretended sleep as a policeman, suspicion clear in his expression, walked down the rows of seats. Gort had taken the precaution of buying a ticket for a train leaving shortly after dawn and he had a good reason for being where he was. He felt the presence of the officer as he halted and stared at him then, apparently satisfied by the slip of pasteboard Gort had stuck in his hat-brim, moved on.

The mental impressions he had received from the dying man had betrayed the presence of others similar to himself. Four others to be exact. And there was something about a ship, a rendezvous, and a time. The whole had been coloured with an overwhelming rage and a bitter self-blame at the loss of a wager. Recalling it made Gort feel mentally unclean.

Visitors from Outside would naturally be equipped with protective force-fields similar to, but usually less powerful than, the one he himself was wearing. Such fields always radiated and that radiation could be picked up by the proper detectors. Unfortunately he didn't have a proper detector and neither did he have the facilities for making one. Even if he had it would have been almost impossible for him to locate, hunt down, and render helpless four separated wearers of protective force-field jackets. The city was too big for that and, without his telepathic ability, Gort was suffering under a tremendous handicap.

He was like a man who owned a car, he could travel faster than any horse—until he lost his car.

He opened his eyes as a man sat down beside him.

"Sorry." The man was fat, middle-aged, and obviously frightened. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." Gort felt that conversation would allay suspicion. The policeman was still patrolling the waiting room. "Waiting for a train?"

"Yeah, and it can't come too soon for me." The fat man dabbed at his sweating face. "I'm getting out of here while I'm safe. You heard the latest?"

"No?"

"That killer's been at work again. Five more people murdered and all found without heads." He shuddered. "That makes a total of eight, nine if you count the copper, and they still haven't got him. It just goes to show you how good the police are."

"They'll catch him." Gort didn't think so but it seemed the right thing to say. "Any clues?"

"They've found some of the heads. A boy picked up a suitcase and the damn thing was filled with them. What sort of man would go round doing a thing like that?"

Gort could tell him but he didn't think that the information would help.

"The police are going crazy," continued the fat man. "They've shot two men by mistake already and the jails are full of suspects." He twisted his mouth as though he wanted to spit. "A hell of a lot of good that's doing. The killer just keeps collecting more heads. They say that they know who he is though."

"They do?"

"Yeah. A man name of Jones. He killed the cop in his hotel room. They're supposed to have seen him and shot him, but either they're lying or they were using water pistols. You can't tell me that a man can keep on running with bullets inside of him." He lapsed into silence and glowered at the approaching figure of the policeman.

Gort waited until he had passed then rose to his feet. The pattern was getting clearer and he cursed himself for not having seen it before. Mason had given him the clue, and, aside from that, he should have suspected the use of a sear-blade when he had looked at the original corpse. But it had been so abrupt, so savage, that he had lost control of his reactions. He knew that it could never happen again, death, no matter how ugly, had lost its power to affect him, but he would have preferred to obtain his education the normal way. What had confused him was the fact that, to him, a sear-blade was a normal weapon. He had forgotten that here they were unknown.

Somehow he had to stop the interlopers.

VII.

San Luchin was enjoying himself. He crouched in the dark angle of the building and watched the bobbing lights of his pursuers as they hesitantly came towards him. The sight almost made him betray himself just to see whether or not they would repeat their useless attempts to kill him but, as his foot struck the suitcase by his side, he resisted the temptation.

The main thing now was to secure the safety of his trophies.

He had collected with the eye of a connoisseur rather than for sheer quantity. He had been clever too, far cleverer than those other fools who had taken trophies without regard as to time or circumstance. Aside from his latest acquisition, a female with a peculiar shade of red in its long, shoulder-length hair, he had been most circumspect. Now, as he stared towards the lightening sky, he knew that it was time for him to retreat to his hiding place.

He had found one, a dingy, smelly, dirty lodging down in the poorer quarters of the city. A place where, as he suspected, his stolen money would grant him the few hours grace he needed until it was time to leave for the rendezvous. He waited until the bobbing lights were almost upon him then, his protective screen fully activated, he darted with deceptive speed from where he crouched.

A man shouted behind him. Guns roared in the confined space between the buildings and lead whined as it ricocheted from his force-field. Twenty seconds and he was around a selected corner. A door stood before him, it was locked but it opened as he fused the primitive mechanism. Through the building, his cat-eyes equally at home in the dark as the light, down a stair and up another, a second door and back onto the streets again with the entire block between him and his pursuers.

Again he repeated the manœuvre, smiling with self-satisfaction at having planned the escape routes so well. To be hunted by things which, though they couldn't hurt him, yet betrayed the glimmerings of intelligence, was, to San Luchin, almost as good as the actual taking of a trophy itself. Mentally he decided to give Heltin a bonus for his services in finding this planet. He would return, of course, the next time armed with greater knowledge of local conditions. The mistake this time had lain in lack of preparation. They should have a base camp, somewhere where the hunters could rest and plan their sport, a central location from which the hunters could strike out in distant areas and so be able to operate alone. Working with other hunters was never the same as lone sport. They tended to be too eager, too unthinking of the full consequences of their haste. Rivalry seemed to upset their judgement.

They became greedy.

It was after dawn when San Luchin reached his hiding place. The blousy woman who let him in betrayed no surprise at the sight of his suitcase. To her he was a top-story man working the city under cover of darkness and, naturally, the suitcase was to contain his loot. All that mattered to her was that he paid well and caused no trouble. The pay she had taken in advance, the trouble she hoped would never come but, if it did, she wasn't totally helpless.

She locked the door after him and jerked her thumb towards the back room.

"Want anything to eat?"

"No thank you." San Luchin was only eager to inspect his trophies but he couldn't tell her that. Instead he stared at her lined face,

mentally visualising it on the wall of his trophy-room. It would do and, even if he chose to discard it, it would count for purposes of the wager.

The woman snuffled and wiped her nose.

"See anything of the killer?" If it was a joke it didn't sound like one. "I've been listening to the radio, seems to me the city's all upset." She stared shrewdly at her lodger. "It's a wonder you didn't get stopped."

"I did." The smile was awkward but he managed it. "Twice. But that was before . . ." He closed one eye and hefted the suitcase.

"A good haul, eh?" Interest lightened her features. "Let's have a look." She misunderstood his hesitation. "You can trust me, hell, I'm square, you can ask any of the boys. Maybe I can steer you onto a good fence if the stuff's right." She reached towards the suitcase. "Let's have a look."

He let her touch the handle, enjoying the mental image of what she would do if she saw the contents then, as she fumbled with the catch, he reluctantly moved it from her reach.

"Sorry, but this is private." He looked towards the back room from where had come the sounds of muttered conversation. "Anyone in there?"

"A couple of the boys." If she felt anger at what had just happened she didn't show it. "Playing cards and killing a bottle. You want in?"

San Luchin shook his head and climbed the rickety stairs to his filthy room. He felt soiled when he looked at it but that couldn't be helped. Personal discomfort was one of the pleasures of the hunt. Not that it mattered, he was impatient to check his trophies for possible damage and, more important, eager to see that he had a representative collection. The time of rendezvous was getting close and he would have little time for other than a hasty hunt for the purpose of winning the wager. That he would win it he had no doubt, he knew his own capabilities.

Locking the door he set the suitcase on the bed and, opening it, lost himself in the pleasure of what it contained.

Time passed and it began to grow warm. It grew more than warm, it grew hot and, as he loosened his jacket, he felt the first impact of danger.

Too late!

Energy writhed around him, the trapped energy of his protective force-field, normally controlled and safe but now breaking loose. Desperately he tore at his smouldering garments then, as the safety margin was reached and passed, he turned into a literal living flame.

It lasted a split second then, with a gush of released energy, he disrupted, the burning components of his clothing setting fires springing from the rotten woodwork and soiled bedclothes.

Within minutes the room was a raging inferno in which nothing living, or recognisable, could exist.

Gort thought that he had been rather clever. He looked around at the littered components on the bench and listened, not without guilt, to the muffled sounds coming from a deep cupboard. The sounds were caused by the owner and sole employee of the radio repair shop now bound and helpless after admitting his first customer. Gort had paralysed him, put him out of the way, locked the shop and set to work.

Now, several hours later, he smiled with quiet pride at what he had made.

It was something which would have caused nothing but derision from the base techs but it was the best he had been able to do. Knowledge, no matter how advanced, is useless without tools and technology. Gort had the knowledge but he had had to build from hopelessly inefficient materials. That he had succeeded at all was something near to a miracle.

On a thick base he had assembled a mass of tubes, wires, altered resistances, adapted transistors, unrecognisable condensers, and a circuit which would have appalled the most knowledgeable mechanic in the business. It was a broadcasting unit of a very special kind designed to do one job and one job only. It would radiate energy which would set up hysteresis in a force-field and amplify it beyond normal tolerance.

He hoped.

Taking off his jacket he picked at a seam and, with exaggerated care, removed a thin, lustrous wire. He set it carefully aside on an insulated table and took a second and a third wire from the jacket. Then, having robbed his own force-field of its power-source, he stripped and, carefully folding the clothes, put them into a metal box. From the outside of the box he ran wires to the ground, then, finally satisfied, he returned to his wires.

Delicately he attached them to his hook-up, taking care that one should not touch the other, fastening them with insulated tools and working with a slow, careful sureness unknown to any but an expert. When he had finished he was trembling with reaction from strain. He waited a moment, checked the hook-up and, turning his back to the bench, closed a switch.

Light blazed from behind him as the power flowed from the wires into the circuit, was transmitted on a special frequency, and surged over the city. Opposite him, the ground-wires on the metal box containing his clothes glowed red, white, began to slump, then faded to black again. The light died and, when he turned, the semi-molten mess on the bench defied recognition.

Dressed again Gort considered his next move. The unit he had built had worked and he knew that every force-field in the city other than his own had dissolved into fuming energy. The visitors, whoever they were, would logically have been wearing those fields so, again logically, they had ceased to exist.

All that remained now was the ship.

The rendezvous, Gort knew, was set for tonight. The location was somewhere near or in the city, but just where he didn't know. Normally that wouldn't have mattered. His own detectors, though weak, would have been able to pick up the colossal radiation from any ship. But, if the ship was screened to avoid Guardian detection then it was certain to be able to avoid his own.

Frowning, he sat on the edge of the bench to consider. The dying mind of the visitor had visualised a stretch of ground bounded at one end by a poorly lit road, and Gort felt that it should be familiar. Within his skull the efficient mechanism of his mind began to correlate data and, when he finally slid off the bench, he was smiling.

He reached for the telephone on the counter and, after looking in his directory, dialed a number.

"Police? I want to speak to Captain Mason. That's right, Mason. Who's speaking? Holden. Gort Holden. That's right."

He waited while the wires hummed.

"Mason? Holden here. I want you to tell me something." Gort smiled at the noises coming from the instrument. "Never mind where I am. I'm sorry about your wallet but I'll send it back to you. You can replace the money from that which you took off me. Now listen. That witness of yours, did he say that he'd seen me running towards some waste ground?" Gort frowned at the instrument. "Please don't waste time. I know that you can probably trace this call but that doesn't matter. Did he? He did? Thanks, that's all I want to know. See you there tonight." Gort went to hang up then let the receiver hang from its cord. They would be tracing his call and he didn't want to stop them. Someone had to free the irate owner of the shop.

VIII.

He spent the afternoon and evening in a cinema, enjoying the sheer primitiveness of the reproduction medium and marvelling again at the inventive genius of these terribly handicapped people. It was dark when he stepped out onto the street and already people, scared of the mysterious 'killer' were hurrying home. An alley gave him all the concealment he needed and, beneath his touch, his force-field shielded gravity and sent him rising like a balloon. To steer himself towards the scene of the first crime was simple and, as he hovered in the shielding darkness, he grinned down at the shapes of lurking figures below.

Mason had the place surrounded.

After that there was nothing to do but wait. He didn't know the exact time of the rendezvous, only that it was for tonight, but he guessed that it would be around midnight or a little later. Actually it was two hours past midnight and he almost missed the ship altogether.

A rush of air warned him, that and a slight occlusion of his marker-points. Gently he lowered himself towards the invisible bulk until, as he penetrated the outer screens, he saw the scarred hull of the ship itself.

He was standing outside when Heltin opened the air lock.

"San Luchin?" The explorer stared outside. "Where are you?"

Gort moved a step closer.

"San Luchin? Hurry up, will you, I want to get away from here." He cursed monotonously as Gort didn't move. "What's the matter? You hurt or something?" Impulsively he jumped from the air lock. "I . . ."

Gort caught him as he fell, paralysed and helpless. Quickly he carried him back into the ship and, when Heltin recovered consciousness, he stared up into the disguised features of the Guardian.

"What goes on? Who are you?" Heltin climbed to his feet. "Where are the people I brought here?"

"How many did you bring?" Gort used mental communication and the fact that he did so seemed to shock Heltin into an awareness of his position. He sagged and almost fell and when he had finally straightened his features were a peculiar greenish colour.

"The Guardians!"

"That's right. Well?"

"I'm just a pilot," babbled the hapless man. "I'm working on charter. All I know is that I dropped San Luchin with four of his friends here three revolutions ago." He swallowed. "You know about them?"

“What did you bring them here to do?”

“I don’t know.” It was useless and Heltin knew it. To lie to the Guardians, or to any telepath was a waste of time. He turned to the attack. “Well, what of it? So I’ve broken a few Regs, no great crime in that, is there?”

“Enough to earn you quite a period of immolation.” Gort was deliberately casual. “You knew that San Luchin and his friends were hunters. You knew that they came here to collect trophies. You knew just what that meant to the inhabitants of this planet. You’ve not only broken quarantine but you’ve broken the Prime Ethic. I’d guess that you’ve earned permanent immolation.”

“No I haven’t I!” Heltin seemed about to collapse. “These things aren’t human. You know they’re not. How could I have broken the Prime Ethic when I haven’t killed or caused the death of a human being.” He looked triumphantly at Gort. “You know that I speak the truth, you damn mind-leeches should be able to know that, and you know that all I’ve done is to bust quarantine.”

He was right. Technically the inhabitants of this planet weren’t human and so Heltin hadn’t been guilty of breaking the Prime Ethic. That was reserved for races who obeyed the one great requirement of the galactic federation. No member of any one race must ever kill a member of that race. It was the dividing line between human and non-human, men and monsters and, unfortunately, the inhabitants of Earth were still in the monster stage.

“You can’t touch me,” sneered Heltin. “So I get a few periods immolation, so what? Get on with it, Guardian, let’s get it over with.”

Gort nodded, his mind busy with strange concepts. Heltin was guilty but, because of a technicality, he was going to get away with it. Unless . . .

Gort stepped forward and felt the slight body before him. No protective clothing. He jerked his head towards the air lock.

“Outside.”

“What? Say, what are you up to. You can’t do this to me.”

“Get outside or I’ll throw you out at two diameters. Quick now!” He used the power of his mind and Heltin obeyed as he had to obey. Gort stood at the open air lock and threw Mason’s wallet towards the shivering man. “Right. Now walk to that road, drop that wallet, and come back here on the run.”

It was murder and yet, in a way, it wasn’t. The Guardians had strong powers and were permitted to use their discretion. If Heltin returned he would be taken to the moon base to stand his trial. If he didn’t . . .

The watching policemen had waited hours and must have been getting tired but they woke up at the sight of a strange figure coming from nowhere. Heltin ignored the first challenge, he took fright at the second, he began to run at the third. The roar of many weapons blasted his body to a shapeless pulp.

Later, when well on his way to the moon base, Gort had time to assess his vacation. He had got out of a difficult situation without revealing his extra-terrestrial origin. He had stopped and punished the menace of an unauthorised visitation to a quarantined planet. He had provided a suitable suspect for the mysterious "killer" and so had made Mason happy. He had taken charge of the ship which had slipped past the detector screens and so would make Rhubens happy too. Promotion would be inevitable and Gort smiled as he thought about it.

Not such a bad vacation after all.

—E. C. Tubb.

There should be a lot of humour in a ghost wanting a divorce, especially if he has been in that condition for several hundred years, and John Brunner makes the most of this unorthodox and peculiar situation right down to the last breath of the spirit.

DEATH DO US PART

By JOHN BRUNNER

They had just declared it officially a drought—which meant that for the past fifteen days less than some infinitesimal quantity of rain had fallen over Southern England. But it was a good deal worse than an ordinary drought. Since it began, the sky had been a leaden, cloudless blue, and the sun had glowered like a bloodshot eye on the streets and parks of London, turning the grass to tinder and the nerves to rags. Even its setting had brought no relief, and Arthur Jordan was profoundly glad when he could close the door of his flat behind him and fling wide all the windows. The air in the room, which had been closed tightly since he departed for the office that morning, was like an oven, but since that beyond the windows was like a furnace, only the brief breeze which now and again stirred the listless leaves of the trees afforded any comfort.

He peeled off his sweat-damp clothes as he walked through the sitting room and recklessly turned on the cold tap for what he feared would be his last cold bath in some time—the evening papers were full of the possibility of a water famine.

The water turned warm even as he sat in it, and when he stepped out the thirsty air dried him almost before he could reach a towel. Despairingly, he went as he was into the kitchen and took ice-cubes from the overworked refrigerator and mixed something to allay his parched throat.

He came back with a glass tall and cool in his hand, and there was someone standing in the centre of his sitting-room, looking anxiously about him. Arthur dropped the glass with a crash, and the stranger turned to face him. The expression on his face changed through varying stages of politeness, astonishment, and embarrassment—and he vanished.

Weakly, Arthur Jordan clung to the back of the nearest chair. His bare foot fell on a rapidly-melting ice-cube in the puddle left by the spilt drink, and he came to himself with a start.

He looked around the room. There was no one there. The door was locked, as he had left it, and it was a thirty-foot drop to the road outside.

For a few seconds he held his head between sweating palms. Then he went determinedly back into the kitchen and mixed a fresh drink. This time he made it rather stronger, and swallowed it before harm should come to it. As he set the empty glass on the draining-board beside the sink, he took a deep breath.

"It must be the heat," he said aloud, to reassure himself. "I must have a touch of sunstroke."

The idea was unsatisfying, but when he peeped cautiously around the door into the other room, he could see nothing unusual. Emboldened, he gathered a dishcloth and a dustpan and went to clear up the mess.

He was interrupted as he was bending over it by a polite cough and a murmur of, "Excuse me, sir! Are you by chance Mr. Arthur Jordan, lawyer?"

He lost his balance and almost fell forward on to the shards, only catching himself at the last moment by seizing the chair which had supported him before. Taking a firm hold on himself, he looked around, trying frantically to turn the dishcloth into a sort of kilt.

There, in the very middle of the room, stood a man. A short, quite youthful man, with brown hair and a snub nose, who wore—in the middle of a raging heatwave!—knee breeches and a long coat and a tricorn hat atop a silver-powdered wig, a sword slung low at his side.

"I beg your pardon heartily indeed for intruding upon you when you are—ahem!—unprepared for visitors, sir," he continued anxiously. There was a hint of north country in his accent. "But believe me, it is—ah—quite imperative!"

For a few moments Arthur struggled to impose a semblance of order on the boiling currents in his mind, but when he finally managed to speak, his voice was a squeaky falsetto.

"How did you get in here?" he blared.

The other shifted from foot to foot, trying to avoid Arthur's searing gaze. "My deepest apologies, sir!" he repeated.

"I don't care how deep your apologies are!" roared Arthur. "What do you mean by breaking into my rooms and daring to stand there while I—while I—"

The dishcloth slipped, and he dodged behind the back of the chair, grabbing the trousers which he had fortunately left there on his way to the bathroom. A man without trousers is at something of a disadvantage under any circumstances, and receiving a man who seems to have lost his way from a fancy-dress ball is particularly harrowing to the soul.

"The truth of the matter is," said the stranger, fidgeting with the gold braid on the hilt of his sword. "The truth is, sir—" the words came with a rush and a sudden lapse into broad Yorkshire—"I'm a bogle."

The trousers secured around him, Arthur came cautiously forward. Plainly he was dealing with an escaped lunatic of some kind.

"Won't you sit down?" he said soothingly. "This heat is enough to—"

"Sir, I thank you," said the stranger, politely removing his hat and placing it on a nearby table, "but I do not feel the need to—ahem—relieve my limbs of their burden in my present state."

"You mean you're not staying?" hazarded Arthur feebly after a pregnant pause.

"No, sir. With your leave I do propose to remain so long as is needful to transact my affairs. Oh, but I perceive you are not familiar with the northern word which I used in the heat of the moment." He drew himself up to his full height.

"I, sir, am what you call a spirit, or spectre. In the vernacular—" he stressed it wrong—"I am a spook."

"Yes, yes," said Arthur, measuring the distance to the door with a cautious eye. If he could get through there before the madman caught him—

"If you doubt my word," the stranger began, laying his hand on his sword, then dropping it with a rueful grin. "I forget myself.

It is not the fashion now, I do believe, to settle slights to one's honour by the rapier. In faith, I would not myself have swallowed such a tale lightly. In earnest of my truthfulness, then, allow me—"

He vanished again.

Arthur stopped his stealthy edging towards the door. He felt as if his head would burst in another few seconds. There was no one else in the room now.

But on the table still lay the three-cornered hat. Only half-doubting now, he picked it up. It was feather-light—almost airy, substanceless.

His heart pounded as he stepped to the place where the stranger had stood, reached out a tentative hand, and passed it through what was indisputably empty air.

"Have I persuaded you, good sir?" the voice came again from behind him.

Arthur replaced the hat on the table. He nodded weakly and dropped into the chair as the ghost came forward to collect his headgear.

"Allow me to present myself," he said with a flourish. "James Shaw of Clayhurst—" he caught himself, again with that rueful smile—"late of Clayhurst in the county of Yorkshire, at your service." He came forward and sat down on a hard chair facing Arthur, spreading his coat-tails right and left with care.

"Now, sir, I am correct, am I not, in believing you a lawyer?"

"Yes," admitted Arthur, weakly.

"Then I would beg a favour of you. I have grave need of your services, though how I shall repay you I know not, sin' my worldly goods were despoiled—"

"Don't worry about that," interrupted Arthur. "After all, it's quite an honour in itself to advise a—" he swallowed painfully—"a ghost."

"Sir, I am truly indebted to you. Well, to the heart of it. I wish to have my—ahem!—my marriage dissolved. What, in the parlance of your day, is called a divorce."

"What?" demanded Arthur in a shaking voice.

"A divorce." Shaw seemed to be gaining confidence. "I have heard from sundry shades who shared my plight temporarily during the late terrible war which was fought 'twixt this country and the Germanies that such a thing may be more lightly come by in these days—though surely," he added, sighing, "if ever an age would countenance such things, mine should have."

"But how—" Arthur's voice refused pointblank to come under proper control—"how can a ghost have a divorce?"

"That, sir," said Shaw, with a shake of his head, "is the point on which I crave your aid."

"I'm afraid you've come to the wrong party," said Arthur. "I'm a company lawyer—I specialise in matters of business, or trade. I've never done any divorce work."

For a moment, Shaw looked so crestfallen that Arthur felt sorry for him, and added, "But I'll do my best for you."

"Sir, I shall be eternally grateful," asserted the ghost with relief. "And mark you, being as I am—alas!—an immortal creature, that is not lightly said."

"Wait a moment," Arthur requested. He got up and went in search of the bottle of whisky he kept in the kitchen, locked safely away from his landlady. He suspected he was going to need it.

Shaw accepted some of the liquor rapturously, though Arthur imagined he would rather have had 'clarry,' and it went—wherever a ghost puts materials things like that—at once.

"Go on," said Arthur, when he was sure that the alcohol was going to help.

"Know then, sir," said the ghost, wiping his lips with an enormous and beautiful lace 'kerchief, "that I was—am—the son of a wool merchant of Yorkshire, and grew up there at Clayhurst Hall. Though my father was but a rough man, he had amassed much wealth and saw to it that I received an education befitting my station. To my sorrow, however, when I was but twenty years of age my father died, and my mother did not long outlast him.

"I, though, was a lively youth, and—ahem!—personable, and did seek to improve myself in the company of my betters. I therefore lived much of the year in London, leaving my business to my father's bailiff, asking only a reckoning when I deemed it necessary. In that road I prospered. I was well acquainted with my lord Greenhough, and my lady Gosport, and Sir Charles Tregarron—"

Watching, Arthur saw the faint swell of pride which accompanied this recital of the names of the forgotten great—leading lights of fashion in their day—and saw how the young country-bred boy, acutely conscious of his real inferiority, must have striven to keep up with the bucks and Corinthians of that rakehell age. The whisky brought a twinge of pity.

For a few moments Shaw fell silent, thinking with regret of a departed day. Then he coughed and resumed.

"But when I was six-and-twenty years of age," he went on, "I bethought me that I should take a wife and settle down. If truth be

told—ahem !—my substance was wasted somewhat. Then I fell in love.

“ I could have—you will pardon me speaking thus ignobly of a lady, sir, but this is ’twixt man and man—I could have enjoyed her charms without the rites of matrimony had I so desired. Would that I had ! But no, poor fool that I was. Needs must I marry her and carry her off in triumph to my boyhood home. Kitty Tregarron was her name, the minx—sister to Sir Charles. Yes, I was happy when I took her from the wedding to begin the long journey northwards. You will understand me when I say that I had quite turned Kitty’s head, so that she was impatient, and we paid but little attention to the country about.”

His face softened as if he was thinking with pleasure of that journey.

“ When we were yet but a few miles from London, crossing Hampstead Heath—we were to reach our first post quite shortly, and it was full dark—we were set upon by highwaymen, and though my coachman, brave lad, discharged his pistol at the thieves, they overpowered us. In their terror lest they be discovered, they—” He broke off.

“ They—ahem !” That nervous cough was catching ! “ Killed you ?” ventured Arthur.

Shaw nodded, his head bent. “ Alas, yes ! They dragged us thence to a grave on the bare heathland, which no man ever found. My wife Kitty, and my coachman, and myself—”

“ And you became ghosts ?”

“ In sooth,” Shaw answered, bravely looking up. “ Why that sad fate should befall us—Kitty and myself—and not my coachman, I know not, unless it be perhaps that we were—not godly folk.” The burr showed in his thickened voice for a moment.

“ At first I bore it with considerable fortitude. But then, alas, my sweet wife Kitty, who in the fashionable world of London and of Bath had been so airy and genteel, proved on lasting acquaintance to be nothing more than a nagging shrew. A very nagging shrew !” He lingered over the words, and then turned beseechingly to Arthur.

“ Sir, may you never know what it is to be the sole company of a sharp-tongued woman for nigh on two hundred years !”

Arthur considered the idea with distaste. He could see the ghost’s point of view. “ Why haven’t you done anything about it before ?” he demanded. “ Two hundred years is a long time to wait.”

Shaw shook his head sadly. “ In faith it is. But it was not until some few years ago—I know not how long—that I began to devise such a plan. In my day it was not thinkable so lightly to unloose the bonds of matrimony, and when I came to see that something might in

truth be done, I was—ahem !—in difficulties. Know you that a spirit such as I is bounden not to cross a running stream ?”

Arthur thought for a while. Then he sat up with a jerk. “Of course !” he exclaimed. “I never saw it before. The drains ! The sewers !”

Shaw nodded approval. “We may walk only ’twixt sunset and cockcrow,” he said. “In that time I have often tried to leave Kitty—we speak but little these past fifty years. But I have ever been turned aside by the water beneath the earth—until this blessed drought which is upon us.”

It took a moment for it to sink in, and then Arthur threw his head back and laughed loudly and long. Shaw sat with a hurt look on his face, staring at the wall.

“I’m sorry,” said Arthur, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. “I wasn’t laughing at you, I swear—only at the thought that while everybody else in London is cursing the heat, you’re glad of it. Have another drink.”

When their glasses were full again, he went on, “I’m truly grateful to you, Mr. Shaw. You’ve brought me the only really interesting case I’ve ever had. Let’s drink to it.”

They drank. As he set his glass down, Arthur added thoughtfully, “But there’s one snag. I don’t see what on earth we can do about it ! There’s no legal precedent for divorcing a dead man.”

“A—spirit—I spoke to in the late war,” said Shaw tentatively, “told me of a man that had been called dead because he had not been heard of for some years—seven, I think. But though the law deemed him dead, when later he was found to be alive, they set the decree aside.”

“You mean, if you turned up in a material body—” he rapped the hard crown of the hat with his knuckles—

“Your grave was never found, you say ?”

“No. Therefore, I take it, my rascally bailiff would have sought such a decree after seven years.” Shaw looked hopeful.

“You know, the more I think of this, the more possibilities I see in it. This is wonderful !” He chuckled with delight at the thought of his dustier colleagues in the divorce courts faced with the problem of divorcing a ghost.

“Wait, though,” he added, and raised a hand to forestall a remark from the ghost. “You said you can only walk at night ?”

“Between sunset and cockcrow,” agreed Shaw, looking anxious.

“That means you wouldn’t be able to present yourself in court,” said Arthur dubiously. “You couldn’t make a personal application.

Besides, you'd never get to the court even by day—you'd almost certainly have to cross a drain or a water main. And your wife would have a chance to defend the case, too. If her lawyers pleaded that living men weren't bound by such rules as you are, the court would have to confirm the legal declaration of your deaths."

Shaw thought it over. At length he said with great emphasis, "The devil take all legal quiddities!"

He rose to his feet and bowed, his face set. "I apologise once more for intruding," he began.

"No, don't go," said Arthur, rising and thrusting him back into the chair. The sensation was rather like pushing against balsa wood, there was solidity but scarcely any resistance. "I think you're one of the most interesting people I've ever met, and if you'd like to stay I'd be glad to have you. After all," he finished, "I haven't had a chance to think your case over properly yet."

"I'm ableeged to you, sir," said Shaw with relief. "It will indeed be a pleasure for me to have genteel company after so long."

That began one of the most fantastic nights Arthur could remember. By the time half the whisky had disappeared, they were calling each other by their first names, and James Shaw was retailing scandalous stories of the notables of his age which Arthur suspected had never reached the history books. By the time Arthur decided that he simply had to go to bed, or he would never be fit for work in the morning, he had taken a lesson in duelling and given one in canasta—a game which James asserted would have been the rage of Bath when he knew it. They parted on the best of terms.

The last thing Arthur remembered was shouting at the fading spectre to 'come back and haunt him whenever he could.'

In the clear light of morning—which was far from cold, for at dawn the temperature still hovered in the sixties—Arthur rubbed his aching head and looked around him. He had had a dream of some kind—heatstroke, perhaps . . .

No, even this sort of heat didn't produce a raging hangover. He stumbled out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. On the way he passed the scattered cards and the empty glasses.

He ran for the washbasin and doused himself with cold water. A hallucination didn't drink whisky.

All that day he found his mind straying from the complications of company law to the intricacies—or rather idiocies—of ghostly divorces, and every now and again he chuckled aloud at what his boss would say—and think!—if he heard that his junior partner had spent last night with a ghost. In the lunch hour he bought a fresh bottle of

whisky to take back with him, and found that he was really looking forward to meeting James again.

And then the blow fell. He was met on his return by an anxious head clerk, who told him in a graveyard voice that the senior partner had been taken ill, the doctor had diagnosed heat prostration and ordered complete rest, and he had an appointment for dinner that evening with a very important client.

After astonishing the clerk with a pyrotechnical display of eighteenth century expletives, learned the night before and much more colourful and satisfying than their pallid modern equivalents, Arthur agreed wearily to take on the job. When he finished work for the day, he rushed home with his whisky and forced himself into the torment of evening dress. Even his black tie seemed discouraged by the heat.

He set the bottle and some glasses out before he left, and wrote a note explaining his absence which invited James to stay as long as he liked and to come again the following night. At first he intended to leave it in the open, and then he realised that if his landlady looked in . . .

He sealed it in an envelope addressed formally to James Shaw, Esq.—and ran.

Ezra Maxton, formerly of Carchemish, N.J., was, as he told Arthur several times in the course of dinner, really taken with the Old Country. But he didn't let the love he bore for England over-rule his business instincts. In spite of his preoccupation, Arthur managed to keep his mind on the problem long enough to settle the transaction during dinner. To his dismay, Maxton was so pleased with the terms that he insisted on carrying on at his expense to a nightclub afterwards. Under the influence of the heat and the drinks, Arthur's control slipped steadily, and it was not long before he was lost in divorce law again.

Maxton, on the other hand, expanded as fast as the carnation on his lapel wilted. By midnight he had shown Arthur colour pictures of his wife and son—"Very nice!" said Arthur absently, and forgot immediately—and by half past he was enthusiastically discussing English tradition with a sad-looking bowl of flowers in the centre of the table.

Then Arthur caught the tail-end of a sentence and sat up with a start.

"Excuse me," he interrupted, trying to fix Maxton with his eyes—the American kept drifting unsteadily about. "My—ahem!—my mind was wandering. Did you say *ghost*?"

Maxton looked equally surprised. "I was just saying," he repeated, "that now we've agreed to live over here, we found the cutest little house in Hampstead. It's been modernised, sure, but outside it's just the cutest shack you ever saw. The only thing it *doesn't* have is a ghost."

"Do you *want* a ghost?" said Arthur, his heart pounding.

"Why—guess it would be nice to have one, at that. Not, mind you, the kind that goes around raising Cain and rattling chains. No, just a nice high-class spectre—to give tone to the place." He must have been drunker than he sounded, or he would never have said it.

"I can get you one," said Arthur owlshly. He had just seen the way out of James's predicament.

"You can *what*?" demanded Maxton.

"I can get you a ghost," Arthur rushed on. "Guaranteed quiet and respectable. And he's awfully high-class. In fact, when he was alive he was the brother-in-law of a baronet!"

"That sounds just dandy," said Maxton soothingly. "Now have another drink."

"No," said Arthur, getting to his feet. "You said you wanted a ghost, I can get you one. Law of shupply—*sup*-ply and demand. Come on!"

He dragged the bewildered American out of the restaurant and into a taxi, praying—as soon as he fully realised what he had done—that James had liked his whisky too much to leave at once. His prayer was answered, and as he let himself into the room ahead of the visitor, he found the ghost sitting over a half-empty glass and crying steadily—intangible tears of ectoplasm, presumably.

He brightened up when he saw Arthur, and held up the note which he had left. At Arthur's hurried whisper to make himself invisible, he looked pained, but consented, though the liquor he had taken on board made the departure a little piecemeal, and for quite ten seconds after Maxton entered the room there was a ghostly ruffle barely visible against the bathroom door. Fortunately, it remained unnoticed.

Arthur sat Maxton down in a chair and made sure that he was tight enough not to panic. Provided he hadn't got a weak heart, everything was perfect. He poured three drinks, saying to the air, "James? Will you come back now?"

Now that it came to the pinch, he was regretting his rashness, but if it went through he would solve two problems at once.

"Good evening to you both!" said James, appearing behind Maxton's chair. The latter turned—and almost fell off the seat.

"Lord!" he whispered in awe. "It's a real one!"

"Uh—may I introduce the—the late Mr. James Shaw, of Clayhurst, in Yorkshire?" said Arthur, swallowing. "James, this is Ezra Maxton. He's an American."

"Ah yes, a colonial," said James. "I'm honoured, sir," he added with a wobbly bow.

"Mr. Maxton has just bought a house near here," Arthur explained. "He wants a ghost to go with it. Would you like to take on the job?"

Maxton picked up his glass and drained it. Then he put out a cautious hand and touched James's hat, which lay on the table. The eerie feel of it seemed to convince him, and he took his hand away hurriedly.

"You've found a way to break this tie that holds me to my Kitty?" the ghost said, half-fearfully.

"I think so," said Arthur, drawing a deep breath. "Were you married according to the rites of the Church of England?"

"Of course! Think you that I'm a Papist?"

"Thank heaven for that," breathed Arthur. "Now listen. Marriage is binding as a civil contract, but it has—like all my favourite contracts—an escape clause. I make my living spotting them," he added parenthetically. He put both hands on the table and leaned forward.

"Do you remember the bit about 'till death do us part'?"

For a moment James looked blank. Then he grinned widely, and broke into a few solemn steps of a dance. "Arthur, I'm forever in your debt!" he shouted. "That means, doesn't it, that nothing now binds me to my Kitty?"

Arthur nodded, beaming fatuously. "If you only have to have and hold till death do you part, there's nothing to stop you leaving her once you are dead."

Maxton had slid down in his chair and closed his eyes.

"You haven't made any special undertaking to stay where you—uh—live?" Arthur went on.

James shook his head. "'Tis only that one cannot go far thence for the running water."

"Right, then! Hold on while I get a pen and some paper and I'll draw you up a contract that *is* watertight." Singing a bawdy ballad in which James had instructed him the night before, Arthur went into the next room.

It was certainly the strangest legal document ever concocted—but it was foolproof. Arthur was sure of that. It bound the ghost of James Shaw, Esq., late, etc., to haunt the premises of 'Gables,' Mecklinghen Road, Hampstead, owned by the undersigned Ezra Maxton, late of Carchemish, New Jersey, for the duration of his supernatural

life or until such time as the house was demolished. In return, James Shaw was to receive exclusive rights to the ghostly occupancy of the said premises.

"You see," said Arthur happily, as he added the final clauses and wrote in a signature block, "this assigns the sole rights to you. Unless you change your mind, Kitty won't be able to follow you. Now all you need to do is sign here."

The ghost seized his pen and wrote his name with a flourish.

"That's fine," said Arthur, and witnessed the signature. "Now, Mr. Maxton—"

He looked around. "Good lord, he's asleep," he said in disgust. "Well, he asked for a ghost and a ghost he shall have. Help me wake him up."

With the help of a soaking wet cloth they managed to rouse the snoring man, and he signed, pausing every second letter to look at James and confirm that he was still there. When the contract was complete, Arthur folded it with a chuckle and handed it to James.

"Keep that in a safe place," he advised. "If Kitty tries to horn in on you, show it to her. It's binding!"

Then he phoned for a taxi and they left for Maxton's house. The cabby was convinced that his passengers were crazy, because they kept making him stop and take alternative roads whenever James felt the queasiness he had learned to know as running water ahead. Eventually, however, they reached their destination and pushed Maxton in through the front door. From somewhere upstairs there was a soprano shout.

"That you, Ezra honey?"

Maxton groaned softly, said good night with a final apprehensive glance at James, and went upstairs. By the time he reached the first landing, he was chuckling, and before he disappeared he was laughing uproariously.

Arthur smiled and closed the door.

"Well, good luck, James," he said. "Maxton seems like a nice guy. I think you should enjoy yourself here."

"Sir—" James seemed to have become quite sober in the last few minutes. "Sir, I assure you of my eternal gratitude. This is a service—"

He looked as if he was going to cry.

"Forget it," said Arthur uncomfortably. "I'd do the same for anybody—any spirit," he corrected himself. "If Maxton ever forgives me, I'll come round and see you sometimes. May I?"

"Be assured that I for one will ever welcome you," said the ghost.

"Good night, Arthur. And may you sleep in peace when—"

He turned and faded into the wall.

For a long time Arthur stood on the doorstep. At last he turned and went back down the path to the waiting cabby, who was half asleep over his wheel. Happily, he gave his address, and drowsed himself in the back of the vehicle.

In due time, the reputation of the Maxtons' 'genteel ghost' naturally spread abroad. In the course of time it brought even a tenacious but unwelcome member of the Psychical Research Society. Despite that, whenever Arthur dropped in to chat with James he found him thoroughly contented. He liked the Maxtons and he liked their friends, and all in all, he said, he was nearer to paradise than at any time since his death.

The winter set in, as cold as the summer had been hot, and pipes buried even in the depths of the earth cracked and split with the frost. Late one January evening Arthur was sitting huddled by a small fire with three sweaters under his jacket, working overtime on a particularly knotty point of law, when there was a rustle behind him.

He turned to find a young woman in a full-skirted gown in the centre of the room. Her neckline was enough to prevent him turning away again.

"Pray do not be alarmed at my sudden intrusion," said his visitor. "I have heard it said that you're a lawyer. Is't so?"

Well, at any rate this time I have some clothes on, reflected Arthur. And I can see why she turned James's head, all right. Mmm, yes! Ve-ery nice. Perhaps she's been subdued by the loss of her husband—

Aloud, he said, rising, "Mrs. Kitty Shaw, I believe? Won't you sit down?"

But when the pipes melted she had to stop coming.

—John Brunner.

Life in the Ordnance Dept. of Mars Base will never be dull as long as Herman's dachshund Dimple continues to poke her nose into other people's business—this time it is a case (or some cases) of stolen supplies.

HOUNDED DOWN

By JOHN KIPPAX

Illustrated by HUNTER

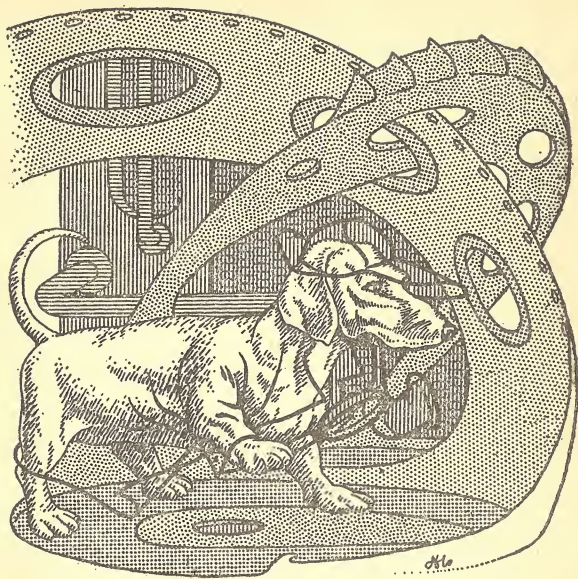
We are sitting in the corner of the packing bay in the Ordnance Dept. at Mars Base and our faces are dark with thought. Satchmo's face is always dark, but you get what I mean. I am utter cheesed and it is all on account of this dachshund Dimple what sits here looking at me most soulful and pleading.

It is all your fault you know Herman boy says Satchmo: I am surprised that an experienced man like you should get on a charge for such a thing.

Satchmo is a pal of mine see, so being as tactful as a charging BEM he does not specify what I am experienced in.

Cor stone me through an airlock I say, I know that the sanitary regs here are hot but cannot they believe it was an accident?

Sure says Satchmo, I can believe: but what will Lieutenant Tearhouse say? It is likely that this will be looked on as such a grade A fizzer that he will have to slap you in front of the colonel.



And when I think of being pegged in front of our old johnthomas himself I go all cold inside. Little old Dimple wags her little old whip of a tail and she tries to tell me she loves me.

Which doesn't help much. Nothing seems to help me. I've lost me stripes, lovely Louisa the queen of the PX ignores me, and even Dimple, being an honorary sergeant, can pull rank on me. Life in Mars Ordnance depot is a bind and no mistake. The only thing what I have not been lagged for so far is this pinching of little bits of tech and counter equipment that has been going on for some time, and which the SIB bods (Special Investigation Branch) can't pin down. You wait. It is only a matter of time before they pin it on me.

Dear ma—sell the pig and buy me out.

So the next morning it is cap off you left right left right halt right right turn number 4848111 pfc Herman J. Herman SIR ! It is this very official bit of foot bashing which, directed by our sergeant major, lands me in front of Lieutenant Tearhouse in the company office. Miller and Satchmo (Satch being the only non-Ordnance Corps man present) and one or two other bods are outside as witnesses when and if. Now, I know that this charge will put the loot in a bit of a spot because he too has a dachshund, named Pluto, and this male hound and mine are going steady, and they are a very good vermin hunting team: small vermin I mean—not big shockers like master sergeants.

So then our SM he takes a deep breath and opens his face to this effect.

Charge against the above named soldier SIR !

Under sections 126/7 of the Space Regulations Hygiene Section this soldier is charged with secreting comestible organic matter in a place unsuitable for its retention, and of allowing portions of the said organic matter, to wit, dog biscuits, to decay and cause an unpleasant odour, and furthermore to allowing the growth of spore bacilli as per laboratory report attached.

Blimeyoreilly.

Let me explain.

Since the happy days when Dimple and Pluto first got here, things have tightened up. She and her boy friend both have to go round to the cookhouse and be fed: nowhere else are they supposed to get chow, though they slip into the PX kitchen for a snack and a bite with Louisa too: maybe this accounts for my hound's chassis being a bit more underslung than formerly. That however is neither here nor on Phobos Point is that food may not be taken anywhere except in the official feeding places. But strictly. Not even a nice packet of wine gums. But when my dear old aunt Gertrude on earth sends something special, I fall. These are some packets of Super Vitaminised Homogenised Crunchy Pooch Pieces, and I do not hand them into the cookhouse, but I keep them in a locker in the packing bay, and hand them out to Dimple as rewards for her tricks and party pieces.

One day Satchmo, (who is always skiving into our depot for various dark reasons, one of them being a very tasty coffee-coloured WAC named Nina) rigs up a series of hurdles in the packing bay, and we entice Dimple over and through these by using a couple of Super Vitaminised Homogenised Crunchy Pooch Pieces on string for bait. We are well out in the main bay with this lark, when the lookout for NCOs hollers *stripes* and we grab the hurdle and Dimple and we try to get us straight. I get a bit panicky and I shove these S V H C P Ps down the side of a heating unit, and when Miller walks in like death on stilts we are all working away like billyo.

But I forget about these doggy dainties. They stay where put, rich and moisture absorbing, and within a few days the pong pointer in the bay (noxious odour control) is marking them up more than somewhat. And I do not catch on.

But the guy on sanitary duty that week catches on: it is a guy named Funk, who, because of a certain little thing I once arranged for him, loves me like sand in his stew, and before we can say Procyon the stinking remains are wheeled into the lab. Miller wheels round to slap me on a charge, and I am wheeled in here in front of Lieutenant Tearhouse.

Oh, it is all very matey.

Tearhouse looks at the charge sheet and he says serious, very serious pfc Herman he says there are regulations as long as your arm about this sort of thing.

Oh yessir I say I am very sorry sir.

You see, I think that I am in such a spot here that there is nothing will help. So, I decide to make a clean breast of it, as it was, and I lower my eyes and I put a sob in my voice and I say I am passionately attached to Dimple she is all I have sir.

This will arouse the fellow feeling what there is in one dog owner for another see?

The loot speaks softly: I can see that I have got him where he has feelings. His eyes get the way tech sarges' optics go when they lean over the PX counter and look at Louisa. Of course he says, I understand Herman, but orders is orders he says and must be obeyed what? Space hygiene is vital Herman where would we be without it?

I could make some suggestions but not here later: I just say yessir ohyessir.

What was this dogfood he asks.

Supervitaminisedhomogenisedcrunchypoochpieces sir I say.

Really says the loot and he looks as though he is going to give a medium smirk and then he recovers and he nearly blushes and says hrrm hrrm.

Then we get company.

We hear Miller outside holler stop that dog ! and the next moment Satchmo comes tearing through the door of the company office after Dimple, trips over the mat and lands up against the Loot's desk like a sack of jet slag.

And Dimple sits up and looks at me and nearly says hello.

Before we know where we are there is another little yip from outside and in comes Pluto, and he says hiya cousins in the lingo too.

Oh, it is quite a party.

Then Satchmo gets to his plates of meat and he slings the officer a salute and starts to apologise and says suh it was an accident suh.

Satchomo was *born* saying those words.

Then Pluto and Dimple are at it again. Dimple is the visitor in this part of the blister, but Pluto sure knows his way around. The bottom drawer of the loot's desk is open, and Pluto goes to it and gets his head in, and gives a tug. And I am amazed too because Dimple goes all rigid and gives her pleased little crowing noise, which she only gives when she smells these here dainties what get me into trouble, or something very tasty.

Then the case against Herman J. Herman folds up.

But fast.

Pluto drags from the drawer of the lieutenant's desk a packet of Super Vitaminised Homogenised Crunchy Pooch Pieces.

Not long after the affair of the S V H C P Ps I am in the packing bay one morning thinking of not much except the old usual. I am just asking myself will Satchmo manage to get round for a cup of java and a gab at PX break, when in walks Master Sergeant Miller and oh chase me fanny frail you should see him with his new little SIB flash on his sleeve and his great ugly face screwed up like a dragnet bloodhound.

It is so funny peculiar that Olsen and Menotti, Ramirez and me, we do a titter.

Then Miller sees us and he glares and some pieces of packing plastic shrivel round the edges, and then he says gather round you lugs I want all your attention.

So we gather round and take a good giz at the beauty: we do not wish him any harm ohno. We would just like to plant him on Deimos with about an hour's air supply, and in front of a vidio camera: then we would like to sit in the PX lounge and watch the fun on the screen there. We are an affectionate crowd.

Now there are things in this depot what will have to stop at once he says, as though we don't know. And Ramirez mutters like you breathing and Miller does not quite catch it but his top lip goes up. Out of the corner of my eye I see that Dimple has appeared and she is listening to the blue eyed boy's spiel. I must keep an eye on her because she had a piece out of his trouser leg before. Dimple can tell a rat any place.

Now listen he says you guys in this packing bay have been here the longest and we want your views on this business of stores disappearing. You know the sort of thing he says, it is valuable little sub-assemblies of electronic gear which you can flog easy on earth.

But sarge I say sticking my neck out as per usual why pick on us ? They don't come out this way, the whole system is too watertight; we know what we are doing here sarge I say.

We always check back the serial numbers of the vouchers what come into the bay on top of the stores says Olsen, so I don't see that they are getting out this way sarge.

And Miller says I want some suggestions, not a lecture on stores issue procedure: Herman he says you know a lot about the guys having been a corporal once.

Yes sarge I say, and the look I give him doesn't do a thing to his swinging brick of a heart.

Then he shoves a list of names in front of me and I giz through them. I become aware that two people are looking over my shoulder and breathing down my neck. It is private Abraham Grant Washington and he is holding Dimple in his arms.

Then Satchmo says in his dark brown voice Sarge Miller suh, you got new guys in here then ?

I say listen you, it does not have to be new guys who are coming the old acid with this flogging; there are characters in this set up who would skin their NCOs while they slept.

And like it mutters Ramirez.

Then Satchmo says well if the stuff ain't come out of the depot then it's still in it.

And we all gaze at Satchmo in wild surmise.

Hiding it right under our noses says Miller.

Nerts, I say: stock check is every six months, and wrong binning gets spotted quick as a meteor on the blister.

Leave ship says Satchmo, is always just before stock check, once every six months: do you dig that man ?

Miller gives a whoop, and he goes, and we know where. Dimple says wuff wuff and we wuff wuff a bit too.

See that I moan: there he goes like a blue ended Martian straight for the office. He comes in here and asks what we think, and our pals, what can't keep their wide open spaces shut when they should, gives their ideas to that louse who will whip them in as his own. I address the crestfallen soldiery and I say you should all be ashamed of yourselves that it takes a Service Corps guy to come in here and tell us our business.

And as nobody looks me straight in the optic I figure that I have said a righteous piece. Then break rings, and we crowd off for that cupper.

Satchmo is pretty snootful about the way Miller snuck his ideas, but I am able to slip the informal word to Tearhouse while passing the time

of day on doggy subjects, and so Satchmo has some credit and it's included in the shower of assorted soldiery which gathers to confer in the name of an SIB investigation. It is simple—set an Ordnance man to catch an Ordnance man, and if you know any other sayings which sound like that one I will thank you to keep a cover on that unsightly hole in your faceplate.

Miller, Ramirez, Tearhouse, Funk, Satch and your everfaithful have a heap big spy round, and eventually we *find* the missing stores, hidden in the depot. Oh, it is a real dandy job—a beautiful compartmented false back to a couple of racks of scinto dials, and we know that if we get a show-down over this then heads will also have to roll over who made this nifty hideaway.

We have to watch this cache carefully, and yet we must not arouse suspicion: we want to grab the lot of them who are concerned with it. And we watch and watch but we discover nothing at all: there are all the little valuable bits and pieces tucked away, and not a fingerprint on the lot of them to give us a lead.

So life goes on and the time for the leave ship draws near. The guys due to go back for their once-every-three-years on the return freighter are getting all dolled up and singing in the PX and talking about the second and third things they will do when they get home. They do not mention the first because Louisa is a real lady, and she runs the PX with strict attention to the morals of the brutal and licentious who frequent the dump.

And Satchmo and Dimple and me, we mingle with the crowd, heavily disguised, if you follow me, as us. We are agents.

Satchmo I say, do you feel good as a private eye?

And he says man I am several light years away from being sold on the fact we are on the same side as Master Sergeant Miller: man, do you not find this crazy weird?

So I say Washington do not try to take away my hate: it is all I have left.

Then Dimple licks my hand and I apologise to her.

Then Satchmo says man Herman boy we got not too much time to find out whodunit: I am worried he says, for Miller is like to pin it on somebody else if we cannot get these larcenical louses fixed. He is going round with bars in his eyes—warrant rank bars.

Sure Gatemouth I say your reasoning is cool and your points rate a high dig. Neverthehow I feel that when they start we will discover the whole chain of disposal, right from the first move it gets in the depot, into somebody's kits and out by truck to the port. The customs check on leave kits is about nonexistent why do you not have the common manners to listen what are you staring at?

Satchmo is leering round like an ebony zombie.

He is all nonattention to what I am saying.

Hey I say why are you gizzing round like that ?

He is as hammy as a fifty-week teleserial.

Then Satchmo says realise Herman that if we look around this canteen we shall see the robbers plainly labelled.

Go on I say I am all ears and when he does not make the obvious crack in reply I can see that he is serious. So I say give.

It is pay night says my china and on top of that the leave ship as well as a couple of supply ships will be in in a day or so. There is an atmosphere about the place—guys are happy and relaxed—see what I mean ?

We watch while the snowdrops come in and blip over the head a couple of enthusiasts who have been discussing Wembley Tigers versus Sydney Lions—with fists. They drag the bodies out and there are twin thumps from outside just before we hear the can wagon start up on its rounds again.

OK, I say—happy and relaxed: so what ?

All you gotta do, he says, is to find a little group of leave men who *ain't* looking happy and relaxed: they will be thinking of the swag they are going to take away, plotting and planning.

I am struck all of a tiz.

Satch I say, you are a genius.

I know he says, but you are welcome, and he looks all modest and violettish, which is quite a feat considering his build and colouring.

So we go round eyeing groups of guys and we slide through the general yak yak, and all I seem to see is happy jolly laughing spacemen. (That noise is me spitting). I begin to think that we are at a dead end when I see three men in a corner who seem to be preoccupied quite some. They are drinking beer, and they sit there, a gruesome two-some plus one, talking out of the corners of their mouths like ancient Runyon characters.

Satchmo says hist, so we do—Dimple and me both.

He says look—two Ordnance Corps guys and a Service Corps. I know him—an Asiatic brown named Tagore: he does a lot of driving to the port—could be on the leave baggage detail: how about the others ?

I am all excited. There is Corporal Fabre I say, the white with the cauliflower ear, and the coffee-coloured is a guy named Ford. They both work in instrument section.

What do you think? asks Satchmo.

Washington I reply, I am sold on your sayso: I think we should go and gab with Tearhouse and the sergeant major, and, if you'll pardon the expression, Master Sergeant Miller.

We find the above mentioned and when we have spilled it we can see that the officer is so pleased that I have visions of tapes and congrats from the colonel and maybe me getting the meritorious and Satchmo too. Even Miller makes an effort and has to approve, but of course, he has to put in another suggestion.

A day and night watch on the stuff is indicated sir he says, and we then do a little mick taking.

Might I suggest sir I say to the loot all lofty like that the object of his here probè is to nab everybody with a finger in it?

And he says go on Herman.

If we put a watch on the cache they will smell a rat sir.

There is a slight interlude while we calm down Dimple and her boy friend: they know the word and they think we mean business.

Let's bring in the lab on this sir I say, and make a trap so that we can leave the stuff absolutely unguarded. I do hope sir I say, that when Master Sergeant Miller last handled the stolen goods that he wore gloves sir: these types are smart enough to see if there are any finger prints.

And Miller goes red and stutters.

And we say tut tut tut, and he goes redder.

Then I go on why can't we give the goods a light dusting with some radioactive stuff, so that we can be sure of getting a line on the whole operation, catching them just before the blast off of the leave ship.

And the loot says brilliant brilliant Herman why man you have been hiding your light under a bushel, and he says don't you think it is brilliant Miller and the MS bares his teeth and goes all wallfaced like a mummy in a sack of argus.

Oh, it is horrible to see.

He knows that we do not forget.

Then Satchmo says if the lab can fix us something suh then all we got to do is to go along the line with a counter when that leave party is all ready and a few clicks will tell us the story.

Fabre and Ford I say.

Maybe says the loot.

And Satchmo grins and then, just for the hell of not being caught, he slips his hand under the table and hands the hounds a Super Vitaminised Homogenised Crunchy Pooch Piece.

It is the morning of the departure of the leave ship, and the whole unit is a bit steamed up. This is natural: any soldier has with him a few permanent notions what can raise pressure in him like a Double K jet. We in the probe department are full of anticipation: we do not

see what can go wrong, but perhaps we do not want to try very hard. The lab boys have done us real proud, though the MO put a slight crimp in the notion by insisting that the amount of dusting we gave the stolen stuff was so small that we could find only one counter of a type with a scale low enough to register it for certain. All the others of this type are way out in the test areas, in the desert.

So there is the leave party all lined up, smart as paint. The office clerks have checked their papers and the colonel has had a few words with them, and there doesn't seem to be any reason why they can't pile into the waiting transport.

Not much.

Satchmo and your faithful are watching, along with the sergeant major, Tearhouse and the colonel, some SIB bods, and some snow-drops are lurking round the corner.

We feel tense: those little assemblies and such are not in their old hiding place now, and there are some guys here somewhere who have radioactive particles on their hands. Miller has the counter at the ready.

Then there is a proper turn up for the book, and no mistake. I am ashamed of that hound my aunt Gertrude sent me, and her boy friend is no better mannered.

Oh it is real tragic.

There is a wuff and a double wuff and up shoot Dimple and Pluto. They come skidding onto the parade square, and before I can do anything they are in front of Miller, who is walking as delicate as a flea on Jupiter. The two hounds get right under Miller's feet in a flash: he trips, falls base over apex and the counter goes flying. My two possible stripes then sing oh for the wings of a dove and go fluttering away on them.

Oh, there is proper confusion.

Miller gets up and says words what ought to fuse all the silica for yards round: he picks up the counter then, has one giz at it and shakes his head. The two unproud dog owners catch their charges and try not to notice that the colonel has gone puce and is making noises like grit in a ham sandwich.

Then Dimple suddenly struggles and gets free from me, and before we know what is on she trots down the front line of the leave party. And she stops and sniffs at a soldier, and I get a crazy notion and I think no this cannot be.

The loot says yes it can Herman look she is pointing at corporal Fabre !

And the SIB guy says go collect her we will take a chance on this and I do so, and that Fabre does not seem a very happy guy. Then the

SIB bod whips out a small container and says let her have a sniff at the radiation: and Dimple backs a bit and goes wuff. And I say find Dimple old girl find and her black nose wrinkles.

Satch comes up and when he is told what goes on he smiles like a lighthouse and he says excuse me I think I ought to help Master Sergeant Miller with that counter in case we can make an emergency repair. Which is a peculiar thing to say, because Satchmo knows less about counters than a BEM knows about piano-playing. Still, he goes off with Miller, and it is OK to try out this with Dimple. Our only available counter is bust and blast off for these guys is in three hours: it is now or never.

Then the loot shows his cunning.

Listen men he announces, there are one or two among you who are thieves: I am going to walk down the line with this specially trained dog, (he should have said dogs because Pluto insisted on coming too) and the dog will point at the culprits, knowing them by their hands which were contaminated by the radio-active stores which they took.

Silence.

Then there is a thud.

Corporal Fabre faints, and they take him away.

The loot is a psychologist see? He thought it best to frighten them into giving themselves away, but Dimple *did* point to him again, making her little winnying noise, just like she was counting the clicks.

I am that proud of her.

But the other men seem to be a bit tougher: no one else faints.

At this stage of the hooah Miller and Satchmo come back and Miller says sir the counter has had it.

And I feel my eyes pop.

Dimple makes that little winnying noise again *and points to Miller!*

Blimey. So Miller is in it too. Dimple says so!

He sees the way we look at him and he sees what Dimple has to say about it, and he yelps NO! It's a mistake it wasn't me I never CALL IT OFF!!! . . .

and then the boys of the snowdrop brigade have him and they cart him off to the cooler. Satchmo I say this is the end. Miller! I cannot believe it! And Satch does not say anything but he has a most peculiar look, as though he may explode any minute.

I am dazed. I do not understand one little bit. All I know now is that my little Dimple is out there and is bringing my two and maybe *three* stripes back.

And Dimple and her train approach the coffee-coloured named Ford. He is quite still. Dimple stops and her nose begins to twitch. And before anyone can do anything Ford lets out a snarl and he catches

Dimple a kick on the side of the head and runs. There is an uproar and ranks are broken as honest guys go for him, and I rush forward feeling like murder. I kneel down beside the still form of my little pal. Things seem a bit misty.

We are in the waiting room of the medical centre—Tearhouse, the sergeant major, Satchmo and me and Pluto. Dimple is in there with the medics, and we feel proper upset. Old Bloddyhand himself, our chicken colonel surgeon no less, is having a look at her, and we know that she could not be in a better place.

But we and Pluto are anxious.

We make spasmodic chit chat.

Tearhouse says I should not be surprised if you boys get a citation out of this.

I say ohyes thankyou sir.

Tearhouse can see that I care nothing for such larks at this moment.

Miller says the sergeant major, fancy it being Miller.

And again I notice this peculiar face Satchmo makes: he reminds me of a sunset trying to appear at midnight—as though he wanted to laugh at something and did not dare.

So I slide over to him and whisper what gives?

He smiles so that you cannot see his face for teeth, and he states man I am so glad that it will be a day or so before they get another counter to verify what Dimple told us about Ford and Fabre and Miller.

I do not get this at all, but before I can say more we get to our feet because the chicken colonel surgeon is there.

We crowd round.

You will be glad to know he says that her skull is not cracked. She will be OK, says he.

And we breathe sighs of relief.

He goes on there are two things you ought to know about Dimple pfc Herman.

We hang on his words.

The first is the reason why she is so intelligent he says. She is a freak: you notice that head she has? She is double brained.

We register: this explains a lot I think, like the way she sits and listens to you when you talk, and how she sorts the labels in the packing bay.

What is the other thing sir I ask?

Your lady sergeant hound he says, twinkling a bit, will shortly have to be discharged from the service under the appropriate para of WAC regs. She will soon become a mother.

We look at Pluto, and he is overcome with dachshundly modesty, or something.

Well then the party breaks up and I am much relieved and I think maybe I will go and tell Louisa and as Satchmo and your faithful cross the parade ground we feel pretty spry. I say Satchmo man, I still do not dig Miller being one of the gang.

No ? Says he, and he makes a noise like a leaky bottle of Sola Cola.

And the Satchmo lets it go. He stands there in the middle of the parade ground with all the offices and what have you around, and he throws back his head and he begins to laugh. It is a sound such as I never thought to hear from any human being; it is wild, and griping and fearful, a savage African noise what goes back right past the days of bows and arrows, never mind space ships.

Hahaheehoyhoyhaaaaaahohehehohaarr !!! he goes, and lots more.

I stand and gape: I can do nothing: I let him run down. Then he says listen Harman boy I saw a chance this afternoon, so when he went off with the counter I contaminated him properly. When they get a counter to check with they will soon find he is innocent: meantime let him have a taste of the guardhouse ! And he starts to yak again.

I am that mad.

Give, you cussed African ! I shout: here is me and Tearhouse practically brothers in law, and us maybe getting stripes and I want this all tied up. Furthermore aunt Gertrude gotta know. GIVE !

Yeah yeah, he says, sure, and he wipes his eyes. See, while I was with Miller and he was fiddling with the counter, I contaminated him for a *certain* Dimple reaction. I shredded up and dusted round his trousers a whole Super Vitaminised Homogenised Crunchy Pooch Piece !

Blimey, I say, blimeyoreilly: no wonder the next world president is going to be an African.

—John Kippax

Not every author who regularly writes science fiction or fantasy consistently goes on improving his plots or style, but C. M. Kornbluth despite increased output in the past few years is still progressing from 'excellent' and upward. A new novel, Not This August, to be published in the Spring by Michael Joseph Ltd., is outstanding.

THE MINDWORM

By C. M. KORNBLUTH

The handsome j.g. and the pretty nurse held out against it as long as they reasonably could, but blue Pacific water, languid tropical night and the low atoll dreaming on the horizon—and the complete absence of any other nice young people for company on the small, uncomfortable parts boat—did their work. On June 30th they watched through dark glasses as the dazzling thing burst over the fleet and the atoll. Her manicured hand gripped his arm in excitement and terror. Unfelt radiation sleeted through their loins.

A storekeeper-third-class named Bielaski watched the young couple with more interest than he showed in Test Able. After all, he had twenty-five dollars riding on the nurse. That night he lost it to a chief bosun's mate who had backed the j.g.

In the course of time, the careless nurse was discharged under conditions other than honourable. The j.g., who didn't like to put things in writing, phoned her all the way from Manila to say it was a damned shame. When her gratitude gave way to specific inquiry, their overseas connection went bad and he had to hang up.

She had a child, a boy, turned it over to a foundling home and vanished from his life into a series of good jobs and finally marriage.

The boy grew up stupid, puny and stubborn, greedy and miserable. To the home's hilarious young athletics director he suddenly said: 'You hate me. You think I make the rest of the boys look bad.'

The athletics director blustered and laughed, and later told the doctor over coffee: 'I watch myself around the kids. They're sharp—they catch a look or a gesture and it's like a blow in the face to them, I know that, so I watch myself. So how did he know?'

The doctor told the boy: 'Three pounds more this month isn't bad, but how about you pitch in and clean up your plate *every* day? Can't live on meat and water; those vegetables make you big and strong.'

The boy said: 'What's "neurasthenic" mean?'

The doctor later said to the director: 'It made my flesh creep. I was looking at his little spindling body and dishing out the old pep-talk about growing big and strong, and inside my head I was thinking "we'd call him neurasthenic in the old days" and then out he popped with it. What should we do? Should we do anything? Maybe it'll go away. I don't know anything about these things. I don't know whether anybody does.'

'Reads minds, does he?' asked the director. *Be damned if he's going to read my mind about Schultz Meat Market's ten per cent.* 'Doctor, I think I'm going to take my vacation a little early this year. Has anybody shown any interest in adopting the child?'

'Not him. He wasn't a baby-doll when we got him, and at present he's an exceptionally unattractive-looking kid. You know how people don't give a damn about anything but their looks.'

'Some couples would take anything, or so they tell me.'

'Unapproved for foster-parenthood, you mean?'

'Red tape and arbitrary classifications sometimes limit us too severely in our adoptions.'

'If you're going to wish him on some screwball couple that the courts turned down as unfit, I want no part of it.'

'You don't have to have any part of it, doctor. By the way, which dorm does he sleep in?'

'West,' grunted the doctor, leaving the office.

The director called a few friends—a judge, a couple the judge referred him to, a court clerk. Then he left by way of the east wing of the building.

The boy survived three months with the Berrymans. Hard-drinking Mimi alternately caressed and shrieked at him; Edward W. tried to be a good scout and just gradually lost interest, looking clean through him. He hit the road in June and got by with it for a while. He wore a Boy Scout uniform, and Boy Scouts can turn up anywhere, any time.

The money he had taken with him lasted a month. When the last penny of the last dollar was three days spent, he was adrift on a Nebraska prairie. He had walked out of the last small town because the constable was beginning to wonder what on earth he was hanging around for and who he belonged to. The town was miles behind on the two-lane highway; the infrequent cars did not stop.

One of Nebraska's 'rivers,' a dry bed at this time of year, lay ahead, spanned by a railroad culvert. There were some men in its shade, and he was hungry.

They were ugly, dirty men, and their thoughts were muddled and stupid. They call him 'Shorty' and gave him a little dirty bread and some stinking sardines from a can. The thoughts of one of them became less muddled and uglier. He talked to the rest out of the boy's hearing, and they whooped with laughter. The boy got ready to run, but his legs wouldn't hold him up.

He could read the thoughts of the men quite clearly as they headed for him. Outrage, fear and disgust blended in him and somehow turned inside-out and one of the men was dead on the dry ground, grasshoppers vaulting on to his flannel shirt, the others backing away, frightened now, not frightening.

He wasn't hungry any more; he felt quite comfortable and satisfied. He got up and headed for the other men, who ran. The rearmost of them was thinking *Jeez he folded up the evil eye we was only gonna—*

Again the boy let the thoughts flow into his head and again he flipped his own thoughts around them; it was quite easy to do. It was different—this man's terror from the other's lustful anticipation. But both had their points . . .

At his leisure he robbed the bodies of three dollars and twenty-four cents.

Thereafter his fame preceded him like a death-wind. Two years on the road and he had his growth, and his fill of the dull and stupid minds he met there. He moved to northern cities, a year here, a year there, quiet, unobtrusive, prudent, an epicure.

Sebastian Long woke suddenly, with something on his mind. As night-fog cleared away he remembered, happily. Today he started the Demeter Bowl! At last there was time, at last there was money—six hundred and twenty-three dollars in the bank. He had packed and shipped the three dozen cocktail glasses last night, engraved with Mrs. Klausman's initials—his last commercial order for as many months as the Bowl would take.

He shifted from nightshirt to denims, gulped coffee, boiled an egg but was too excited to eat it. He went to the front of his shop-work-

room-apartment, checked the lock, waved at neighbours' children on their way to school, and ceremoniously set a sign in the cluttered window.

It said: 'NO COMMERCIAL ORDERS TAKEN UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.'

From a closet he tenderly carried a shrouded object that made a double armful and laid it on his work-bench. Unshrouded, it was a glass bowl—*what* a glass bowl! The clearest Swedish lead glass, the purest lines he had even seen, his secret treasure since the crazy day he had bought it, long ago, for six months' earnings. His wife had given him hell for that until the day she died. From the closet he brought a portfolio filled with sketches and designs dating back to the day he had bought the bowl. He smiled over the first, excitedly scrawled—a florrid, rococo conception, unsuited to the classicism of the lines and the serenity of the perfect glass.

Through many years and hundreds of sketches he had refined his conception to the point where it was, he humbly felt, not unsuited to the medium. A strongly-moulded Demeter was to dominate the piece, a matron as serene as the glass, and all the fruits of the earth would flow from her gravely outstretched arms.

Suddenly and surely, he began to work. With a candle he thinly smoked an oval area on the outside of the bowl. Two steady fingers clipped the Demeter drawing against the carbon black; a hair-fine needle in his other hand traced her lines. When the transfer of the design was done, Sebastian Long readied his lathe. He fitted a small copper wheel, slightly worn as he liked them, into the chuck and with his fingers charged it with the finest rouge from Rouen. He took an ashtray cracked in delivery and held it against the spinning disc. It bit in smoothly, with the *wiping* feel to it that was exactly right.

Holding out his hands, seeing that the fingers did not tremble with excitement, he eased the great bowl to the lathe and was about to make the first tiny cut of the millions that would go into the masterpiece.

Somebody knocked on his door and rattled the door-knob.

Sebastian Lond did not move or look towards the door. Soon the busybody would read the sign and go away. But the pounding and the rattling of the knob went on. He eased down the bowl and angrily went to the window, picked up the sign and shook it at whoever it was—he couldn't make out the face very well. But the idiot wouldn't go away.

The engraver unlocked the door, opened it a bit and snapped: 'The shop is closed. I shall not be taking any orders for several months. Please don't bother me now.'

'It's about the Demeter Bowl,' said the intruder.

Sebastian Long stared at him. 'What the devil do you know about my Demeter Bowl?' He saw the man was a stranger, undersized by a little, middle aged——

'Just let me in please,' urged the man. 'It's important. Please!'
'I don't know what you're talking about,' said the engraver. 'But what do you know about my Demeter Bowl?' He hooked his thumbs pugnaciously over the waistband of his denims and glowered at the stranger. The stranger promptly took advantage of his hand being removed from the door and glided in.

Sebastian Long thought briefly that it might be a nightmare as the man darted quickly about his shop, picking up a graver and throwing it down, picking up a wire scratch-wheel and throwing it down. 'Here, you!' he roared, as the stranger picked up a crescent wrench which he did not throw down.

As Long started for him, the stranger darted to the work-bench and brought the crescent wrench down shatteringly on the bowl.

Sebastian Long's heart was bursting with sorrow and rage; such a storm of emotions as he never had known thundered through him. Paralysed, he saw the stranger smile with anticipation.

The engraver's legs folded under him and he fell to the floor, drained and dead.

The Mindworm, locked in the bedroom of his brownstone front, smiled again, reminiscently.

Smiling, he checked the day on a wall calendar.

'Dolores!' yelled her mother in Spanish. 'Are you going to pass the whole day in there?'

She had been practising low-lidded, sexy half-smiles like Laureen Bacall in the bathroom mirror. She stormed out and yelled in English: 'I don't know how many more times I tell you not to call me that Spick name no more!'

'Dolly!' sneered her mother. 'Dah-lee! When was there a Saint Dah-lee that you call yourself after, eh?'

The girl snarled a Spanish obscenity at her mother and ran down the tenement stairs. Jeez, she was gonna be late for sure!

Held up by a stream of traffic between her and her streetcar, she danced with impatience. Then the miracle happened. Just like in the movies, a big convertible pulled up before her and its lounging driver said, opening the door: 'You seem to be in a hurry. Could I drop you somewhere?'

Dazed at the sudden realization of a hundred daydreams, she did not fail to give the driver a low-lidded, sexy-smile as she said: 'Why,

thanks! and climbed in. He wasn't no Cary Grant, but he had all his hair . . . kind of small, but so was she . . . and jeez, the convertible had *leopard-skin seat covers* !

The car was in the stream of traffic, purring down the avenue. 'It's a lovely day,' she said. 'Really too nice to work.'

The driver smiled shyly, kind of like Jimmy Stewart but of course not so tall, and said: 'I feel like playing hooky myself. How would you like a spin down Long Island?'

'Be wonderful !' The convertible cut left on an odd-numbered street.

'Play hooky, you said. What do you do?'

'Advertising.'

'*Advertising* !' Dolly wanted to kick herself for ever having doubted, for ever having thought in low, self-loathing moments that it wouldn't work out, that she'd marry a grocer or a mechanic and live for ever after in a smelly tenement and grow old and sick and stooped. She felt vaguely in her happy daze that it might have been cuter, she might have accidentally pushed him into a pond or something, but this was cute enough. An advertising man, leopard-skin seat covers . . . what more could a girl with a sexy smile and a nice little figure want ?

Speeding down the South Shore she learned that his name was Michael Brent, exactly as it ought to be. She wished she could tell him she was Jennifer Brown or one of those real cute names they had nowadays, but was reassured when he told her he thought Dolly Gonzalez was a beautiful name. He didn't, and she noticed the omission, add: 'It's the most beautiful name I ever heard !' That, she comfortably thought as she settled herself against the cushions, would come later.

They stopped at Medford for lunch, a wonderful lunch in a little restaurant where you went down some steps and there were candles on the table. She called him 'Michael' and he called her 'Dolly.' She learned that he liked dark girls and thought the stories in *True Story* really were true, and that he thought she was just tall enough, and that Greer Garson was wonderful, but not the way she was, and that he thought her dress was just wonderful.

They drove slowly after Medford, and Michael Brent did most of the talking. He had travelled all over the world. He had been in the war and wounded—just a flesh wound. He was thirty-eight, and had been married once, but she died. There were no children. He was alone in the world. He had nobody to share his town house in the 'fifties, his country place in Westchester, his lodge in the Maine woods. Every word sent the girl floating higher and higher on a tide of happiness; the signs were unmistakable.

When they reached Montauk Point, the last sandy bit of the continent before blue water and Europe, it was sunset, with a great wrinkled sheet of purple and rose stretching half across the sky and the first stars appearing above the dark horizon of the water.

The two of them walked from the parked car out on to the sand, alone, bathed in glorious Technicolour. Her heart was nearly bursting with joy as she heard Michael Brent say, his arms tightening around her: 'Darling, will you marry me?'

'Oh, yes Michael!' she breathed dying.

The Mindworm, drowsing, suddenly felt the sharp sting of danger. He cast out through the great city, dragging tentacles of thought:

'... die if she don't let me ...'

'... six an' six is twelve an' carry one an' three is four ...'

'... gobblegobble madre de dios pero soy gobblegobble ...'

'... parlay Domino an' Missab and shoot the roll on Duchess Peg in the feature ...'

'... melt resin add the silver chloride and dissolve in oil of lavender stand and decant and fire to cone 012 give you shimmering streaks of lustre down the walls ...'

'... moiderin' square-headed gobblegobble tried ta poke his eye out wassamatta witta ref ...'

'... O God I am most heartily sorry I have offended thee in ...'

'... talk like a commie ...'

'... gobblegobblegobble two dolla twenny-fi' sense gobble ...'

'... just a nip and fill it up with water antbrush my teeth ...'

'... really know I'm God but fear to confess their sins ...'

'... dirty lousy rock-headed claw-handed paddle-footed goggle-eyed snot-nosed hunch-backed feeble-minded pot-bellied son of ...'

'... write on the wall alfie is a stunkur and then ...'

'... thinks I believe it's a television set but I know he's got a bomb in there but who can I tell who can help so alone ...'

'... gabble was ich weiss nicht gabble geh bei Broadvay gabble ...'

'... habt mein daughter Rosie such a fella gobblegobble ...'

'... wonder if that's one didn't look back ...'

'... seen with her in the Medford restaurant ...'

The Mindworm struck into that thought.

'... not a mark on her but the M.E.'s have been wrong before and heart failure don't mean a thing anyway try to talk to her old lady authorize an autopsy get Pancho little guy talks Spanish be best ...'

The Mindworm knew he would have to be moving again—soon. He was sorry; some of the thoughts he had tapped indicated good ... hunting??

Regretfully he again dragged his net :

' . . . with chartreuse drinks I mean drapes could use a drink come to think of it . . . '

' . . . reep-beep-reep-beep reepiddy-beepiddy-beep bop man wadda beat . . . '

What the Hell was that ?

The Mindworm withdrew, in frantic haste. The intelligence was massive, its overtones those of a vigorous adult. He had learned from certain dangerous children that there was peril of a levelling flow. Shaken and scared, he contemplated travelling. He would need more than that wretched girl had supplied, and it would not be epicurean. There would be no time to find individuals at a ripe emotional crisis, or goad them to one. It would be plain—munching. The Mindworm drank a glass of water, also necessary to his metabolism.

EIGHT FOUND DEAD IN UPTOWN MOVIE ; ' MOLESTER ' SOUGHT

Eight persons, including three women, were found dead Wednesday night of unknown causes in widely-separated seats in the balcony of the Odeon Theatre at 117th Street and Broadway. Police are seeking a man described by the balcony usher, Michael Fenelly, eighteen, as ' acting like a woman-molester. '

Fenelly discovered the first of the fatalities after seeing the man ' moving from one empty seat to another several times. ' He went to ask a woman in a seat next to one the man had just vacated whether he had annoyed her. She was dead.

Almost at once, a scream rang out. In another part of the balcony Mrs. Sadie Rabinowitz, forty, uttered the cry when another victim toppled from his seat next to her.

Theatre manager I. J. Marcusohn stopped the show and turned on the house lights. He tried to instruct his staff to keep the audience from leaving before the police arrived. He failed to get word to them in time, however, and most of the audience was gone when a detail from the 24th Pct. and an ambulance from Harlem hospital took over at the scene of the tragedy.

The Medical Examiner's office has not yet made a report as to the causes of death. A spokesman said the victims showed no signs of poisoning or violence. He added that it ' was inconceivable that it could be a coincidence. '

Lt. John Braidwood of the 24th Pct. said of the alleged molester: 'We got a fair description of him and naturally we will try to bring him in for questioning.'

Clickety-click, clickety-click, clickety-click sang the rails as the Mindworm drowsed in his coach seat.

Some people were walking forward from the diner. One was thinking: 'Different-looking fellow. (a) he's aberant. (b) he's nonaberrant and ill. Cancel (b)—respiration normal, skin smooth and healthy, no tremor of limbs, well-groomed. Is aberrant (1) trivially. (2) significantly. Cancel (1)—displayed no involuntary interest when . . . odd! *Running* for the washroom! Unexpected because (a) neat grooming indicates amour propre inconsistent with amusing others; (b) evident health inconsistent with . . .' It had taken one second, was fully detailed.

The Mindworm, locked in the toilet of the coach, wondered what the next stop was. He was getting off at it—not frightened, just careful. Dodge them, keep dodging them and everything would be all right. Send out no mental taps until the train was far away and everything would be all right.

He got off at a West Virginian coal and iron town surrounded by ruined mountains and filled with the off-scourings of Eastern Europe. Serbs, Albanians, Croats, Hungarians, Slovenes, Bulgarians and all possible combinations and permutations thereof. He walked slowly from the smoke-stained, brownstone passenger station. The train had roared on its way.

' . . . ain' no gemmun that's fo sho', fi-cen' tip fo' a good shine lak ah give um . . . '

' . . . dumb bassar don't know how to make out a billa lading yet he ain't never gonna know so fire him get it over with . . . '

' . . . gabblegabblegabble . . . ' Not a word he recognized in it.

' . . . gobblegobble dat tam wooman I brek she nack . . . '

' . . . gobble trink visky chin glassabeer gobblegobblegobble . . . '

' . . . gabblegabblegabble . . . '

' . . . makes me so gobblegobble made little no-good tramp no she ain' but I don' like no standup from no dame . . . '

A blonde, square-headed boy fuming under a street light.

' . . . out wit' Casey Oswiak I could kill that dumb bohunk alla time trine to paw her . . . '

It was a possibility. The Mindworm drew near.

' . . . stand me up for that gobblegobble bohunk I oughtta slap her inna mush like my ole man says . . . '

'Hello,' said the Mindworm.

'Waddaya wan' ?'

'Casey Oswiak told me to tell you not to wait up for your girl. He's taking her out tonight.'

The blonde boy's rage boiled into his face and shot from his eyes. He was about to swing when the Mindworm began to feed. It was like pheasant after chicken, venison after beef. The coarseness of the environment, or the ancient strain? The Mindworm wondered as he strolled down the street. A girl passed him :

' . . . oh, but he's gonna be mad like last time wish I came right away so jealous kinda nice but he might bust me one some day be nice to him tonight there he is lam'post leaning on it looks kinda funny gawd I hope he ain't drunk looks kinda funny sleeping sick or bozhe moi gabblegabblegabble . . . '

Her thoughts trailed into a foreign language of which the Mindworm knew not a word. After hysteria had gone she recalled, in the foreign language, that she had passed him.

The Mindworm, stimulated by the unfamiliar quality of the last feeding, determined to stay for some days. He checked in at a Main Street hotel.

Musing, he dragged his net.:

' . . . gobblegobblewhomyeargobblecheskygobblegabblechyesh . . . '

' . . . take him down cellar beat the can off the damn chesky thief put the fear of god into him teach him can't bust into no boxcars in mah parta the caounty . . . '

' . . . gabblegabble . . . '

' . . . phone ole Mister Ryan in She-cawgo and he'll tell them three-card monte grifters who got the horse-room rights in this necka the woods by damn don't pay protection money for no protection . . . '

The Mindworm followed that one further; it sounded as though it could lead to some money if he wanted to stay in the town long enough.

The Eastern Europeans of the town, he mistakenly thought, were like the tramps and bums he had known and fed on during his years on the road—stupid and safe, safe and stupid, quite the same thing.

In the morning he found no mention of the square-headed boy's death in the town's paper and thought it had gone practically unnoticed. It had—by the paper, which was of, by and for the coal and iron company and its native American bosses and straw bosses. The other town, the one without a charter or police force, with only an imported weekly newspaper or two from the nearest city, noticed it. The other town had roots more than two thousand years deep, which are hard to pull up. But the Mindworm didn't know it was there.

He fed again that night, on a giddy young street-walker in her room. He had astounded and delighted her with a fistful of ten-dollar bills before he began to gorge. Again the delightful difference from city-bred folk was there . . .

Again in the morning he had been unnoticed, he thought. The chartered town, unwilling to admit that there were street-walkers or that they were found dead, wiped the slate clean; its only member who really cared was the native-American cop on the beat who had collected weekly from the dead girl.

The other town, unknown to the Mindworm, buzzed with it. A delegation went to the other town's only public officer. Unfortunately he was young, American-trained, perhaps even ignorant about some important things. For what he told them was: 'My children, that is foolish superstition. Go home.'

The Mindworm, through the day, roiled the surface of the town proper by allowing himself to be roped into a poker game in a parlour of the hotel. He wasn't good at it, he didn't like it, and he quit with relief when he had cleaned six shifty-eyed hard-drinking loafers out of about three hundred dollars. One of them went straight to the police station and accused the unknown of being a sharper. A humorous sergeant, the Mindworm was pleased to note, joshed the loafer out of his temper.

Nightfall again, hunger again . . .

He walked the streets of the town and found them empty. It was strange. The native-American citizens were out, tending bar, walking their beats, locking up their newspaper on the stones, collecting their rents, managing their movies—but where were the others? He cast his net:

' . . . gobblegobblegobble whomp year gobble . . . '

' . . . crazy old pollack mama of mine try to lock me in with Errol Flynn at the Majestic never know the difference if I sneak out the back . . . '

That was near. He crossed the street and it was nearer. He homed on the thought:

' . . . jeez he's a hunka man like Stanley but he never looks at me that Vera Kowalik I'd like to kick her just once in the gobblegobblegobble crazy old mama won't be American so ashamed . . . '

It was half a block, no more, down a side-street. Brick houses, two storeys, with backyards on an alley. She was going out the back way.

How strangely quiet it was in the alley.

' . . . ea-sy down them steps fix that damn board that's how she caught me last time what the hell are they all so scared of went to see

Father Drugas won't talk bet somebody got it again that Vera Kowalik and her big . . .'

' . . . gobble bozhe gobble whomp year gobble . . .'

She was closer; she was closer.

'All think I'm a kid show them who's a kid bet if Stanley caught me all alone out here in the alley dark and all he wouldn't think I was a kid that damn Vera Kowalik her folks don't think she's a kid . . .'

For all her bravado she was stark terrified when he said: 'Hello.'

'Who—who—who—?' she stammered.

Quick, before she screamed. Her terror was delightful.

Not too replete to be alert, he cast about, questing.

' . . . gobblegobblegobble whomp year.'

The countless eyes of the other town, with more than two thousand years of experience in such things, had been following him. What he had sensed as a meaningless hash of noise was actually an impassioned outburst in a nearby darkened house.

'Fools ! fools ! Now he has taken a virgin ! I said not to wait. What will we say to her mother ?'

An old man with handlebar moustache and, in spite of the heat, his shirt-sleeves decently rolled down and buttoned at the cuffs, evenly replied: 'My heart in me died with hers, Casimir, but one must be sure. It would be a terrible thing to make a mistake in such an affair.'

The weight of conservative elder opinion was with him. Other old men with moustaches, some perhaps remembering mistakes long ago, nodded and said: 'A terrible thing. A terrible thing.'

The Mindworm strolled back to his hotel and napped on the made bed briefly. A tingle of danger awakened him. Instantly he cast out:

' . . . gobblegobble whompyear.'

' . . . whampyir.'

'WAMPYIR !'

Close ! Close and deadly !

The door of his room burst open, and moustached old men with their shirt-sleeves rolled down and decently buttoned at the cuffs unhesitatingly marched in, their thoughts a turmoil of alien noises, foreign gibberish that he could not wrap his mind around, disconcerting, from every direction.

The sharpened stake was through his heart and the scythe blade through his throat before he could realize that he had not been the first of his kind; and that what clever people have not yet learned, some quite ordinary people have not yet entirely forgotten.

—C. M. Kornbluth

Most editors dream about the perfect story they will one day receive from an unknown writer. Of course, it never arrives. In the following story the editor's dream is fulfilled—the story is so perfect that it has to be rejected !

THE EDITOR REGRETS . . .

By DUNCAN LAMONT

It was lying on my desk when I got back from lunch. A neat little pile of tinfoil wrappings—or so it seemed at first glance.

Then I looked closer and realised that it wasn't tinfoil—and it wasn't wrappings either.

The sheets were finer than paper, with a bright metallic sheen. There were about thirty of them, quarto size, neatly tacked together down one edge.

I picked them up—and noticed the printing for the first time. It seemed to swim up to the surface of the sheet and crystallise there . . .

Title: "The Perfect Story." By . . . but the name was a queer, unpronounceable jumble of letters and signs that just didn't add up.

Original, I thought, sitting down and lighting a cigarette. I looked for the usual slip with the reader's comments. There wasn't one. That was unusual too. I put my cigarette in the ashtray and turned over the title page.

The pages felt like tissue; a resilient tissue that snapped out every crease the instant pressure was released. Something as fine as that should have been the very devil to separate, but every sheet turned at the touch of a finger. It was a most intriguing presentation—to put it mildly.

I started to read.

I've been a magazine editor for about ten years now—and you read a lot of stories in that time. It's only natural that after a while personal enjoyment succumbs to the analytical attitude. The customer's always looking over your shoulder.

Yet I'd finished the manuscript before I realised it.

I leant back in the chair watching a last drift of smoke from the grey and neglected cylinder in the ashtray. I'd a feeling in my mind that I hadn't experienced in a stack of years.

I was satisfied.

The story clung to my mind like a dream. Yet when I tried to analyse it—it faded. Like a reflection on water, the image blurred as I probed.

I relaxed and lit a fresh cigarette, and it came flooding back again.

The title was no smart-alec twist. For me, at least, it *was* "The Perfect Story."

I rang the buzzer for Sadie, who breezed in with all the confidence born of naturally blonde hair and a figure to match. She was really too ornamental for a place of business—but I hadn't the heart to fire the poor girl. And that gag is as well-worn as the office carpet.

I pointed at the manuscript. "Who left this one, Sadie? And where's the comment's slip?"

Her eyes followed my finger and she blinked.

"What is it?"

"A manuscript," I said. "And presumably it didn't come through you."

"What peculiar paper." She ran her little finger over the top sheet and shivered slightly.

"Unusual."

"Yes . . ." She picked it up delicately and looked at the front page.

I watched in amazement the sudden rush of colour into her cheeks. Apart from the fact that Sadie is not—repeat not—the blushing type, there wasn't a thing in the story to raise a bishop's eyebrow. And she was only looking at the title page.

Trembling slightly, she flipped over the pages. Her colour slipped another few notches towards the infra-red.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Something snap?"

But, for once, Sadie's gift of repartee had been left in the outer office. She had stopped trembling now and she just looked mad—raging mad. Before I could raise a finger she twisted the manuscript in her hands and made to tear it.

"What—!" Then my voice failed me.

Sadie had stopped her futile efforts to tear the material. She reached across the desk and grabbed a paper-knife. I caught her wrist after the second stab.

"What are you playing at, girl!" I saw the glint of hysteria in her eyes and tried to soften my voice, but it was too late.

She buried her face in her hands and started to cry. I looked at her helplessly, then went to the door, opened it, and shouted for Miss Collins.

The old dragon was out of her seat and halfway across the floor in five seconds flat. I could see her lip curling as soon as she heard Sadie's sobs. The vinegary features indicated justified fears.

She swept past me into the office and grasped the shaking Sadie to her bosom.

"There, there, dear. It's all right now. I'll look after you." She shot me a poisonous glance over Sadie's quivering shoulders. "What did he do, dear? Shall I call the police?"

I knew the old sourpuss had disliked me ever since I took this position—I think she'd rather fancied the job herself—but this was a little too much.

"Now listen, Bella . . ." But I should have known better than use *that* name at a time like this. She practically carried Sadie out of the room, which considering my secretary was a well-built girl, gives a certain index of emotional disturbance.

I picked the offending manuscript off the floor and sat down wearily. I regarded the title carefully, and flipped over a few pages. It all seemed perfectly innocuous.

The noises from the outer office gradually died down, and after a few minutes the door opened. It was Collins. She appeared to have calmed down also.

"I think she'll be all right now," she said coldly. "I can't make much sense out of what she says, but it seems to be something to do with some pictures."

I presumed that the latter remark constituted an apology, but there was a peculiar glint in her eyes that made me hold my tongue.

"Could I see the pictures?" she asked at last.

"There weren't any pictures," I replied. "The girl's hysterical. She was looking at a perfectly harmless manuscript when she just blew up."

"Could I see it?"

I had identified the glint in her eyes now. It was triumph. God knows what she had taken out of Sadie's explanations—but she obviously thought that it was something good. For her, that is.

I slid the manuscript across the desk. It still had that fresh-from-the-mint look, even after Sadie's efforts.

Collins sat down in the customer's chair and took it primly in her lap. She turned a few pages with fastidious fingers. Then the pursed lips relaxed and her whole expression melted through disappointment to astonishment.

She started to read.

I didn't expect an emotional response from Collins—she wasn't the type to get worked up over a story—and I must confess her reaction puzzled me. She finished reading, letting the last page slip from her fingers to fall silently into place. She looked dazed; her eyes were blank.

"How true," she whispered. I had to strain to catch the words. "How true."

"You like it?" I asked. I had to repeat the question before it penetrated.

She turned towards me; I could see her eyes coming into focus. "Oh . . . yes," she answered distantly. "But it's totally unsuitable, of course."

"Unsuitable? Nonsense! It's perfect—just the type of story we want. It'll make everything else in the issue look like tripe, but that can't be helped. We just *can't* let this one slip."

"But . . ."

Her amazement was real enough. I picked up the manuscript and ran my finger under the title.

"The Perfect Story," I said. "That's the title—and that's what it is."

She stood up, and walking around the desk, leant over my shoulder.

I turned to the first paragraph and started reading it aloud. It sounded—if possible—even better than the first time.

Collins started to say something. I stopped speaking to listen, and she went right on talking. Her voice was the flat unbroken monotone she used for quoting.

I looked up at her. Her gaze was fixed on the manuscript; the grey, faded eyes were flicking across the printed page. She was reading the opening paragraph aloud.

But the words were completely different!

She stopped abruptly and looked down at me.

"An excellent article," she said, "full of tolerance and wisdom. I wish I'd read it thirty years ago."

The words stuck in my ears, floating on the surface of my mind like oil on water. No matter how well it appeared to add up—my brain refused to digest the total.

Two people, other than myself, had now looked at the manuscript. One saw pictures where there weren't any, and the other saw an article in place of a short story.

I asked Collins to sit down and give me a resume of the 'article.' She started well, but after a few sentences faltered to a dead stop.

"I can't remember," she said angrily. "It's all clear enough in my mind, but I can't explain it. It's just that type of article. You've read it yourself; you know what I mean."

"I have," I explained. "Only when I read it—it was a story. An incredibly good one, but it didn't bear the faintest resemblance to what you've just told me. And when I try to remember it—as you say—it won't come into focus."

We both took it remarkably well. Perhaps the problem itself was sufficiently intriguing to mask that queasy feeling in the pit of the stomach.

We tried our best to take the thing apart and find out what made it tick.

We tried copying down as we read, but the print started to blur badly after the first hundred words. And it stayed blurred. It was impossible to get a complete conscious copy of either version. The only definite thing we got from the fragments was the utter incompatibility of my story and her article.

I fingered the thin sheets in despair. Was there some mechanism within that controlled the image? It didn't seem possible, but the mechanical analogy comforted my growing sense of unease.

I could see the rising uncertainty in Collins' face, and hurriedly mentioned the idea.

She seized on it avidly, and I played along with her—one hysterical female per day was about my limit.

I finally sent her off in an attempt to trace the author, although there was no return address and the name on the title page didn't mean a thing. Still, it must have got into my office through one of the usual channels.

I sat for a while after she left thinking about the mechanical approach, but no matter how I played around with my meagre recollections of the advance of science, I couldn't dream up a solution.

Who would send in a manuscript like that? What did he hope to get out of it? And what was the point if the interpretation was as individualised as it appeared to be?

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," I shouted.

It was Sadie. The clothes and general appearance identified her. Her manner was completely unrecognisable.

"Do you mind if I go home, Mr. Jordan?" she asked meekly.

It was the first time in years she'd mistered me to my face. I wondered what she had seen in the manuscript . . . pictures, Collins had said . . .

"Sure, Sadie. Have tomorrow off if you like."

She turned and left, keeping her eyes conscientiously averted from the desk.

I sighed as the silken legs disappeared through the door. I'd hate to lose Sadie—she was about the only resting place for sore eyes in the office.

However, this wasn't solving the problem of the manuscript. If it had been even only average good I'd have ditched it on the spot, but that story was worming its way around my subconscious. I couldn't throw it aside with an easy mind.

I'd get another opinion on it. Bullock, our senior reader. He should definitely see it.

I picked myself out the chair and headed for his office. He had one to himself for the simple reason that no one would share with him. He was an old, dusty, disappointed man; too long in the trade in the one position.

He looked up grudgingly as I entered.

"Would you mind looking over this R.B.?" I asked.

He indicated the pile of material on his desk with a jerk of his head. A shower of dandruff fell with the motion. That was the impression R.B. gave—one of gradual dissolution. One day I was going to open his door and find an extra large pile of particles; then we could score him off the paysheet.

"This is special," I said, laying it on his desk.

He grunted, but put aside the manuscript he was working on, and picked up the sheets of foil. He didn't blink an eyelid.

I waited for a minute to see if there was any immediate reaction. There wasn't; so I left.

What happened after that was my own fault.

I'd seen the effect the manuscript had had on Sadie, and yet, without a thought, I'd handed it over to Bullock and left him to it.

What I probably expected was a returned manuscript with the usual slip attached: reader's comments . . .

What I got was a scream from the outer office that chilled the blood in my veins.

When I got out, the door of R.B.'s room was open and one of the typists was standing in it. She had her hands over her mouth and she was gathering enough strength for a repeat performance.

The window was wide open. I went over and looked out. Forty feet below on the pavement sprawled the earthly remains of R. Bullock. Five yards away a passerby was being violently sick in the gutter. In between the body and the wall a familiar gleam caught my eye . . . like a piece of tinfoil . . .

I don't know exactly what happened in the next hour. I've a vague recollection of hysterical typists, disinterested voices on the phone, the twisted, pathetic bundle on the pavement, a sea of curious, troglodytic faces—and then the police.

The rest was all questions: Why? What? How? . . .

A constable handed me the manuscript, and I walked back up the stairs to the office with it crumpled inside my jacket pocket. I sat in the strange familiarity of my own chair and parried the questions shot at me by a stolid, grizzled inspector of police.

But I didn't mention the manuscript.

It crinkled silently in my pocket with a life of its own. The urge to take it out and show it to the inspector was practically irresistible—to wave it under those world-weary eyes and shout: "*That's what killed him!*"

But I couldn't. For how was I to know what he might read there?
It might be my confession!

At last they left. The door clicked shut with wonderful finality, and I lay back in a cold bath of my own sweat.

I pulled the thing from my pocket and threw it on the desk. It flattened instantaneously, like a guardsman snapping to attention. I looked at the front page . . .

"To whom it may concern . . ."

The suicide note was short and to the point. It was just the type of note I could imagine R.B. writing—if I could imagine him committing suicide in the first place.

But R.B. wasn't the type. I'd stake the tattered remains of my sanity on that. He'd been driven to it by something in that damned manuscript.

The office was empty now as I'd sent the rest of the staff home after the police had finished with them. I took a walk along to R.B.'s room and started looking, rather pointlessly, through his desk. Why I did it I can't imagine, but I didn't feel like going home and the empty building was getting on my nerves.

The police had been through the place already—I remember the inspector handing me a signed note of what they'd removed—and at first I didn't come across anything but manuscripts. Then I lifted the blotter and the damned thing fell out of my hand onto the floor, coming apart in the process. There was a letter in between the layers of blotter.

I read the heading of a very famous London hospital, and then went on to the letter itself. It was handwritten in a careful-breaking-of-the-news-gently manner; but all it added up to was a death sentence.

The surgeon regretted that the cancerous growth was unoperable: he gave R.B. three months to live.

I wiped the sweat from my face with a handkerchief and put the letter carefully in my pocket. In one way I was relieved—quite probably the manuscript had had nothing to do with his suicide and that was a load off my conscience, but on the other hand—why hadn't he told me?

The dateline on the letter was a month old. He could have had leave of absence to make the best of what time remained, and yet he'd just went on working. The stubborn old fool . . .

I stopped blowing my nose when I heard the outer door snap back on it's hinges. More policemen, I thought, and went out into the main office. But I was wrong—it was Sadie.

"What on earth?"

Her smile was on the tremulous side and her cheeks were flushed, but there was a determined look in her eye.

She walked straight across the floor and kissed me full on the lips. Then she wound her arms around my neck and started to cry.

I was in a state of considerable mental confusion. I'd never made a pass at Sadie in the two years we'd worked together—not because she wasn't worth one, but from a long-held conviction about the immiscibility of business and pleasure. Perhaps, I thought, that damned manuscript has affected her mind.

I prized myself loose and held her at arms length.

"What," I asked as easily as I could, "is the score?"

She wiped away the tears quickly and gave me her thirty thousand volt smile. "Love all, darling," she said, breaking neatly inside my grip. "To think, darling. All those months. I'm sorry I was so silly this afternoon. It was the shock. I thought you were just laughing at me."

Her tone changed abruptly and she leant back to see my face. "You weren't, were you?"

"Come into the office," I said, and taking her arm like the perfect gentleman she obviously considered me, headed for first base.

"Is this what you mean?" I flipped the manuscript in front of her.
"Of course," she said.

I could feel the steady flow of heat from her arm and an intoxicating whiff of perfume as she turned her head towards me. My ornament had stepped off the mantelshelf with vengeance.

"It was a lovely idea saying it like this," she continued. "A wedding photograph of the two of us. I do like the dress, dear. However did you get the picture?"

She lifted the manuscript up with a breathtaking movement and showed me it.

And, suddenly I saw a lot of things.

Firstly, I saw the picture. There I was, to the life, dolled up in a morning suit standing on the steps of a church; and there was Sadie on my arm. There was even the photographer's name in the bottom right-hand corner.

Secondly, I saw the function—if not the *modus operandi*—of the manuscript. It was dream fulfillment. All your private hopes and wishes were focussed and brought to fulfillment on that bland and plastic tinfoil surface. But, for R.B., it could have been nothing but torture—with that death sentence hidden in his blotter. No wonder he had jumped out of the window.

And thirdly, I saw Sadie. But that's getting back to firstly again. . .

I sent the surgeon's letter to the inspector next day. He was most grateful—if more than a little annoyed at his men for missing it. That took one worry off my shoulders.

The manuscript lay on my desk for days. I just couldn't make up my mind what to do about it. In the end I covered it with a pile of rejection slips and tried to forget it. Sadie was most helpful over this operation.

Then, one afternoon, I stretched out my hand for a rejection slip to scribble a few kind words upon, and all I found was the desktop.

I rang for Sadie and we scoured the building—but it had vanished. So had a pile of approximately ninety-five rejection slips.

I hope the author didn't take it too hardly.

—Duncan Lamont

The following little gem by a new author is a grim but satirical effort centred in Ireland, a country where anything can still happen—and often does—and it is safe to prophesy that even the granting of a wish can produce some strange results.

HEART'S DESIRE

By NIGEL WILDE

Well, I don't suppose you noticed that paragraph in the *Irish Independent* last March, did you now? A right awful tale it told to any man sober enough to crawl but drunk enough to understand the whole of it.

Hold on to your glass while I tell you. This happens in Dublin itself which is the world's finest city, God save the dirty, dissolute place. And it happens to Patrick Magonigal who is the blackest hearted scoundrel that ever got conceived behind a billboard.

The same is fair comment on Patrick because he has been back of the wall a dozen times for thievings, boozings and various felonies, and is a shame to his Church and a curse to his family. He is a real ugly darling with bad teeth, and squitty eyes, and warts on his face, long in the body and short in the legs, too small for an I.R.A. soldier and too big for a jockey. However, he is ideal for trundling a wheelbarrow when he takes a mind to work, which is never so long as he has a penny for the beer.

This evening Patrick Magonigal is sitting in Sweeny's Bar near to Eden Quay and slowly drinking the contents of a purse which he has sneaked out of a woman's handbag on the Donnybrook bus. It is a trick that has got him into trouble before and perhaps one of them

psychiatrist fellers could explain it as revenge on the opposite sex because no woman can look at him without blowing her nose.

So Patrick is lurking in a dark corner coddling his only true love, that being a glass of porter. And his squitty eyes keep constant watch for any other glass abandoned half full or lost track of by the muddle-minded. He is not the one to let a few drippings go down the drain so long as he's got a tongue with which to lap.

At eleven o'clock, which is closing time, Sweeny dutifully locks the front door and opens the back one, himself being a law-abiding man who keeps the rules without inconveniencing anybody. Customers drift in and out until midnight by which time the police-sergeant is due for his illegal tot of whisky and Patrick Magonigal has no wish to be seen or asked pointed questions.

Emptying his glass, he goes out and realises when he gets into the night air that there was enough in the purse to take the legs off a man. He stumbles along the quay, lurching this way and that, and doesn't like the looks of the Liffey which is sliding under the bridges all dark and wet and can whip a body out to sea before the saints have time to give it peace.

Leaning sideways in an effort to steer the feet, he gets away from the water, stops and shores up a wall. There he stands for quite a piece, hands in pocket and chin buried in collar while his squitty eyes scowl at the sable river. Farther along the neons are flashing down O'Connell Street, but he isn't drawn that way because he wants to brood in darkness and think of what all that porter could help him do to a woman if she'd let him.

He is still propping the brickwork and the exact time is somewhere between twelve and one o'clock when a stranger appears before him like a banshee risen from the cold earth.

"A fine, soft evening it is," says this feller.

He hasn't the brogue and is not of the Irish. And since he hasn't waited for an introduction he can't be English either. Nor is he a Yank because he doesn't have a lurid tie dangling from his neck or a camera sitting on his belly.

"That it is too," admits Patrick, peering hard in an effort to decide whether chance acquaintanceship might gain him at least a free pint or at most a filched wallet.

"You can chase the drink and the money right out of your mind," informs the stranger. "Because it'll be a far day when I bother with such childish evils. For the reason," he goes on, "that when I am bad I do it expert."

At that Patrick screws up his face and takes another bleary look at him and sees that this feller has thin, cruel features and a beaky nose and eyes that glitter like a tomcat's in the season. But there are no horns in evidence and no forked tail either.

"Sure and you're talking like the Divvil himself," he says.

"You might be right at that too, Mr. Magonigal," says the other, showing pointed white teeth. "Particularly in view of the fact that my name is Shaitan. And where better could we meet than in Dublin which is a hell of a place, especially on a wet Sunday morning?"

"Is it a poke in the eye you're after getting?" demands Patrick, bristling at this foreigner's contempt.

"Not at all at all," says Shaitan, making a pacific gesture. "I am walking along the quay looking for somebody soaked in sin who'll give me a hand with some real dirty work. And then I see you, Patrick Magonigal, there's a proper spalpeen, I say to myself." He looks him over with shining orbs that are greener than the Kerry hills. "I want you to do me a favour."

"Well now," Patrick tells him, desirous of encouraging a profit, "it all depends on what you have in mind."

"Bedad, it's the easiest thing ever," assures Mr. Shaitan. "I have here a small bottle. I am wanting you to take it into a church which is open all night for the comfort of mortal sinners." He lets go a deep, sardonic laugh. "And fill it with holy water."

"And why mightn't you being doing it yourself?" asks Patrick, not drunk enough to lack suspicion.

"Because," says Mr. Shaitan, with the same sharp laugh, "I am allergic to the odour of sanctity which is more than a decent fiend can stand, not to mention the holy moanings that are bad for my nerves."

"Sacred Heart!" comments Patrick. "If that's the sort of heretic you are you do not need the holy water."

"And I do too," contradicts Mr. Shaitan, leering. "By reason of the fact that I can use it to stir certain stubborn virgins."

Patrick wakes up at that because he has heard tell of certain peculiar potions employed for such a purpose, though to the best of his recollection they do not include holy water.

"How does it work?" he asks eagerly, him having a dozen test-subjects in mind.

"The technique is my own and not to be revealed," declares the other. "All I am asking is for you to fill the bottle and mind your own affairs."

"You can go to hell," says Patrick, leaning back against the wall.

"That I will—and in good time to deal with yourself," informs Mr. Shaitan, very confident. "And what with you spitting in your

father's face at his wake you'll be down at the lowest and hottest level along with all the bloody Protestants. That," he adds with considerable menace, "is when you'll wish you had a cooling helper amid the flames. For," he goes on, showing indecent relish, "they will be so terrible fierce that you won't be able to stand or sit and you'll dance an eternal jig while your frying backside jerks like a fiddler's elbow."

"Saints preserve us!" says Patrick, appalled by this lurid picture.

"As if they would bother," scoffs the other, real sarcastic. "Them hairy fellows haven't heard a prayer or confession from you since you were nine and that's so far back they'd swallow their haloes if you gave them a nudge today. And moreover their full attention is elsewhere with what's going on every night in Howth and Clontarf and other sinful parts." He chuckles with satisfaction. "I keep those boys too busy to take a breath and I'm telling you that myself."

By this time Patrick has the sinister feeling that this is not a lot of blarney and that he came out of Sweeny's Bar at the wrong time. He starts weakening a bit and Mr. Shaitan senses this and presses his advantage.

"Fill the bottle," he urges, "and bring it out the church to me. I'll reward you better than an American legacy could do it. I'll give you what you want more than anything else on earth."

"Name it now," invites Patrick.

"I will make you irresistible to women."

"Bejzus, that'll be a miracle," Patrick says with bitterness born of experience.

"An easy reward, very easy," says Mr. Shaitan. "It is possibly the simplest trick in my repertoire. I will make you completely and utterly irresistible. What's more, it's yourself who'll know it and none better."

"Give me the bottle," says Patrick, fizzing all over at the thought of coming conquests.

Listen to me: the two of them walk alongside the Liffey with Patrick going steady because his legs are suddenly cold sober although his insides are as boozed as ever. Turning left they reach a church that must go unnamed because of the scandal of it.

Stopping outside Mr. Shaitan says, "Make a hearty wipe over it before you hand it to me because not a drop must touch my fingers."

He sits on the kerb and grins at the sky while Patrick goes inside. There are only two worshippers at this unearthly hour so Patrick kneels behind them and says a few words to the saints by way of getting some insurance-cover.

Then coming out he fills the bottle which goes *glug-glug* in the bowl. He corks it, dries it carefully, goes down the steps and gives it to Mr. Shaitan.

"A-a-ah ! Divvil a Christian you are this night," says Mr. Shaitan, his eyes gleaming bright green as he pockets the bottle. Then he makes a mighty peculiar gesture at Patrick and adds, "For which I give the promised reward."

With that he slips shadowlike down the street and lets go a hollow laugh that scares a garda who is standing in an alley doing what comes naturally.

Patrick feels himself all over and can't tell any different except that the strength is running out of him like beer from a busted barrel. There is no mirror available to show him what he has now acquired that will kill all the women. But he is weakening so swift that he's likely to lay flat with a pound of candles burning around him.

Alarmed at this he starts off at the best pace he can make, getting worse and worse and calling the saints to hold him until he can find a doctor. His pants start flapping and crawling up his body, his boots slop loosely on his feet, his collar slides over his ears. And just as he reaches the bridge he collapses on the bank beside the river and lays there swaddled in empty clothes.

The rest of it is what they put in the *Irish Independent*, which tells how one Patrick Magonical is believed to have undressed in a drunken frenzy and jumped into the Liffey which the gardai are now keeping watch upon for the body. And how some heartless mother dumped her unwanted child in the suicide's clothing and left it there, the said child being a bouncing boy three or four weeks old, now in the care of the sweet sisters of the Convent of the Good Shepherd.

So that's where Patrick Magonical has gotten to, back of the wall again, flat on his back, struck speechless and denied the booze, kicking and mewling while the holy nuns coo at him and tickle his toes and do everything to show that women think of him as a broth of a boy.

It's a real terrible story and I wouldn't believe a word of it if I wasn't telling it myself.

—Nigel Wilde.

Most readers agree that stories by Mr. Temple are too few and far between but when he does find time to stop writing fine novels for the juvenile field we can usually be sure of something worthwhile from him. "Uncle" Buno, like his creator, is something of a character.

UNCLE BUNO

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

Illustrated by QUINN

He was always "Uncle" Buno to me, though of course he wasn't my uncle—he was a Martian. I had no true uncles. As if they blamed themselves for the lack, my parents always introduced their male guests to me as "Uncle" this or "Uncle" that. A common enough custom, but they kept at it when I was past the kid stuff.

I must have been around twelve when Uncle Buno came. I guess that's the age when a lot of the glory starts to pass from the earth. A year or two later comes puberty and then imagination becomes channeled for a time largely in one direction. "Romance" ceases to mean besieged castles or mysterious space wrecks off Jupiter or heroics in Normandy, and comes very much down to earth. Sex is *the* fascinating mystery.

It still is something of a mystery to me, for I've never married nor pursued any sexual adventure to its natural climax. Polio in infancy withered my limbs and didn't do much for my self-confidence. I hated being a burden to anyone. It was pain enough to have been a burden to my parents.

My father was vital and impatient, with frank eyes. Too frank, maybe, for they said what he thought even when he was silent. They said: "Too bad about you, Paul. We've both had a raw deal. I wanted you out in the spaceways with me. Maybe sometime you'd have your own ship too, and we'd stage a clipper race. Or fire rocket salutes at each other just for the gag. Or rendezvous in Syrtis Major City and . . . But no. It's too bad."

You have to be physically one hundred per cent to be a spaceship skipper.

What opinions my mother had of me she kept to herself. When I was very small, needing the assurance of constant love, like any kid, I used to ask her: "Do you love me, Ma?"

Sometimes she replied "Don't ask silly questions, Paul," and sometimes she just didn't seem to hear me. And presently I ceased to ask, because I knew.

When I was ten she wasn't even there to ask.

Pop had been on the Earth-Mars run for a long spell at that time. Too long for Ma, who could never be called patient either. She went off one day with the man I'd been taught to call "Uncle Barry," and I never saw either of them again. Of course, there was a divorce, but I wasn't told anything about that.

I was sent to live with "Uncle Vic," while Pop went back on the Earth-Mars run. Then one hot Sunday his little green car appeared from the August dust-clouds, and when he stepped out he patted me on the head and walked past me as though it were a casual encounter. And I hadn't seen him in eight months. He talked with Uncle Vic, and my things were packed, and he told me to get in the car with him. We drove off.

"Where are we going, Pop?"

"Home, Paul."

"Is . . . Is Ma back?"

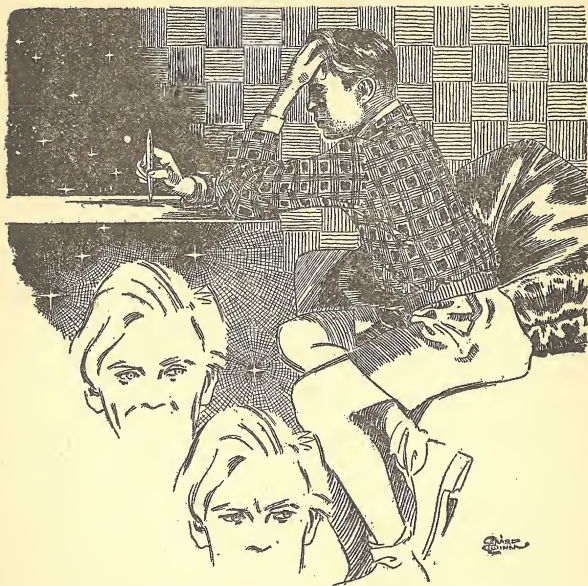
He frowned over the wheel.

"She won't ever be back, son. Forget her. Your Uncle Buno will take care of you for the next couple of years. Then you'll be a big boy, and pretty soon go to college and get a degree. Mathematics, huh—how about that?"

My heart sank. "I'll never get a degree in maths, Pop. I was never any good at it. I've tried, but figures . . . I just can't seem to see figures in my head."

"Don't worry. Uncle Buno is going to coach you. One way and another he knows the score. If he weren't Martian, he'd amount to something."

"A Martian?"



“That’s what I said.”

At that time there was far more racial prejudice against Martians than there is now. They were looked upon as an inferior species. Yet they were much like us in appearance, except that they were albinos. But Mars was a poor, spent planet, and they were a spiritless, lack lustre people for the most part, and their standard of living was low. Like poor people everywhere, they were not respected, especially as sometimes they were forced to beg. Mars became known as “the beggar Earth.”

Most of them were too listless to desire change, but a few wished to emigrate to Earth—and straightway ran into a “Keep the Martians Out” barrier. Only a handful negotiated it, through string-pulling

by really important Terrestrials, like senators, diplomats, big business tycoons—or spaceship captains.

I understood that Martians made good house servants. They never answered back.

I had never seen one in the flesh. Uncle Buno was striking. He wasn't in the house when we got there, and we found him sitting on a canvas-topped stool at the end of the garden, painting in oils.

The picture on the easel was of the farm below, in the valley. I'd seen the farm countless times, played there until I knew the appearance of every knot in the timber of and about it. But I'd never seen it like it was on the canvas. It transcended two dimensions, even three. It was Valley Farm set imperishably in its place in the space-time continuum, glowingly alive. Its very particles seemed to be moving to the rhythms of this wave-shot universe.

Even my father said: "That's pretty good, Buno."

Uncle Buno regarded us mildly, tolerantly. I could see our appreciation meant little to him. He was tall and spare with a noticeably erect back. It's not easy to judge a Martian's age in Earth-years, but I should have guessed he was thirty. One had to ignore the thick white hair—Martian babies are born with white hair. His eyes were light-lashed, pink-lidded, and the irises were as pale as his skin.

Because of this lack of pigmentation, his general effect might reasonably have been bleak. It wasn't.

Because he shrugged off our praise for his work, his attitude might reasonably have been condescending. It wasn't.

He knew that his real critic was not the layman, not the connoisseur, not even time. It was himself. Or rather, the artist in him who told him: "This feels right. This *is* right. It says everything."

And there was no need for anyone else to say anything.

"This is Paul," said my father, introducing me. The tall Martian looked down at me, seated though he was, and I felt the warmth of friendliness flow from him to me. It was a magic moment. I'd never experienced anything quite like it before. I'd received little but coldness from my mother and indifference from my father.

"If I can serve as your mentor, I'm sure we shall both learn, Paul," said Uncle Buno. His English was perfect, his voice pleasantly deep.

I didn't know the meaning of "mentor." My father did, in his usual limited way. He said: "Uncle Buno will give you at least a grounding in three-dimensional geometry."

Then I saw my father's new hope plainly. I couldn't become a space-skipper like him, but I might become the next-best thing: a

space-navigator. Most captains leaned heavily on their navigators, whose prestige therefore was high. You could become a navigator even if you had only one arm. The brain was the important thing. The only necessary function of the body was its ability to push a pencil.

There was a time when prophets said digital computers would oust navigators. Sometimes they still said it, but spacemen didn't believe them any more. Computers were still too heavy for the smaller ships. And on the bigger ships someone had to know the questions to ask them.

I hoped Uncle Buno was a magician. It would take a magician to make me understand mathematics.

Well, he tried. He was patient and kind. I tried, too. At first because I wanted to please Pop and become a navigator. Later because I wanted to please Uncle Buno.

He taught me to appreciate art in many forms, but painting chiefly. Until then, sunsets were to me but the end of a day, presaging bed. He made me see them. He never missed one if he could help it. We sat watching together in the garden, and he would name all the shades of colour that smeared the tumbled clouds, amending the list as they faded, brightened, changed. He taught me how to sketch and label them, so that their glory could be resurrected and fixed on canvas the next day.

With new eyes I saw the marvellously intermingled colours of flowers, the structure of trees, the form of the land, the delicacy of living creatures. Yet I knew that, compared with his perception, I was seeing them through smoked glasses.

He even got me interested in mathematics. Interested, but not very able.

Time and again he told me: "If only you could see it, Paul, mathematics has all the delight of painting. The *rightness* of equations as they work out, each part falling into place so inevitably, gives supreme aesthetic satisfaction. It's fate itself—in figures."

"Figures!" I echoed gloomily.

"Figures, yes. Think of figure-skating, Paul—sweeping, interlacing curves. The curves of graphs are no less beautiful. And they're only two-dimensional. With the extra dimension, in three-dimensional geometry, they come alive. They dance in your brain to fine music! Oh, if only I could make you see!"

But he couldn't.

The long summer faded, the wind began to moan, and the winter snows came delicately but inexorably to block the valley.

I remember one night I went out to the woodshed and on the way was enraptured, uplifted, by the spectacle of the Milky Way. It was a procession of thousands of infinitely distant torchbearers marching across a sable sky arched over a glimmering floor of snow.

The planets shone more steadily, like signal lamps. Somewhere up there, awfully remote, my father was guiding his ship through the immensities. And yet, as I was realizing now, his was not the guiding brain. A keen, clever-faced man, Norridge—I had met him—sat in a smaller cabin, among his charts, dividers, and electronic instruments, and was the power behind the throne.

Father respected Norridge. If I could become like Norridge he would respect me also and forget my physical weakness.

Then I saw Uncle Buno leaning against the side of the shed. He was staring up at the sky too, but only at its lower rim. The snow seemed to shine with its own light and his pale face, paler yet, was visible. I followed his gaze and saw an unwinking red dot of light, low on the horizon. Mars.

I could see his expression only dimly, but unmistakeably it was sad. He became aware of me, turned, smiled. . .

"Hello, Paul. I was thinking of getting something of this"—he swept his arm vaguely before him—"on canvas. Call it 'Winter Nocturne,' eh?"

But I felt he'd been thinking about something else.

He helped me carry wood back. We made up a roaring fire and sat by it. I watched the red-lit shadows playing over his face and wondered. Through the summer and fall we had walked far and talked much of general things. But he had always been reticent about his background, his way of life on Mars. I had learnt that he was married, his wife's name was Jona, and they had no children. It pleased me that he had no children of his own, for I was lonely enough and greedy enough of his affection to have been really jealous.

It was childish jealousy which made me ask: "Do you miss Aunt Jona, Uncle?"

He looked into the fire and said quietly: "Of course, Paul."

"Can't she come and stay with us, then? Father's away most of the time. We've plenty of room."

"The immigration laws don't allow it. Your father had trouble in getting permission for me to stay only two years."

"Oh, aren't they silly! I think people should be able to come and go as they please."

Uncle Buno smiled. "Politicians don't think like we artists."

"Do you think Aunt Jona would like it here?"

"Yes, I do."

"One day," I said, shrilly, "I'll get to be President and change these stupid old laws! Then Aunt Jona can come."

"But I thought you wanted to be a space-navigator?"

"Oh—that! I'll never be that. I can't figure well enough."

For the first time since I'd known him I saw anxiety touch him. He frowned. "We'll do a little revision, Paul," he said, decisively, and reached for a book. It was *Elementary Orbits* and my spirits fell, for there was nothing elementary about the contents of that book to me. Besides, I'd hoped we were in for a nice cosy chat by the fire, and that at last I should learn something of Aunt Jona's and Uncle Buno's home life.

But it was astrogation for the rest of that evening. I didn't do so well, and went to bed unhappy, knowing that Uncle Buno was unhappy also.

I progressed slowly with maths through the winter, but much faster with learning Martian, written and spoken. Maybe it was because I had a flair for languages, as Uncle Buno surmised. More probably it was because it was my own idea and I was under no compulsion.

My painting was coming on, too, but I knew I could never hope to be more than a second-rate artist. The example of the first-rate was before my eyes all the time. Whenever he was through coaching for the day, Uncle Buno began to mix his colours, prepare his brushes and canvases, and, amazingly quickly, produce a masterpiece before the daylight quite faded. The weather hampered him little. If it rained, he'd keep at it till he'd wrought a rainswept landscape that glistened even after it was dry. In gales he would stand like a rock, the long white hair streaming, until he captured in paint the row of tortured elms.

He did still-life too, seeing beneath the surface of commonplace things like a super-Cézanne.

He did only one portrait. That was of my father. I could hardly recognize it. There were the frank eyes, all right, but there was kindness in them. I had never seen that look myself in my father's eyes. I doubted very much that Uncle Buno had, for Pop was becoming increasingly curt and impatient with him. It was dawning on father that his dream for me was no more than a dream.

I applied myself until my mind reeled and my skull felt it would crack open trying to discover the sense in mathematics. My advance was snail-slow.

During my summer vacation my father put me on trial. He'd asked Norridge to get out a reasonably simple test paper on astrogation. After some high pressure preparatory coaching by Uncle Buno, who again showed signs of anxiety, I faced the paper.

I doodled, chewed the end of my pen, held my head, and finally all but burst into tears through frustration.

I answered one question out of nine and then got it only half right. My father made no verbal comment. His eyes showed disappointment so deep it was grief.

Uncle Buno was sad, too, though also saying nothing. As I was going to bed that evening, he said goodnight by the stairs and, surprisingly, held my hand for a moment. "Don't worry, Paul," he said, quietly. "I still think you can do it."

He pressed my hand and relinquished it. "Write me sometimes, won't you?" he said, and turned back into the lounge.

"What was that, Uncle?" I called after him, but the door closed on him.

In the morning, I overslept and came down just in time to see father's green car pulling into the drive. I wondered where Pop had been.

I sought Uncle Buno. I wanted him to explain his parting remark. He was nowhere around. Dad came in.

"Have you seen Uncle Buno?" I asked.

"I have. I've just taken him to the station. He's catching the next ship back to Mars. You were sound asleep, so I didn't waken you."

I stood there like an idiot, my mouth open. I'd gone numb in mind and body. At last, I stammered: "He wanted to go back to Aunt Jona?"

"I expect that was it."

"How—how long will he be away?"

Pop compressed his lips. "He's not coming back, Paul."

"Oh!" The exclamation was more anguish than surprise. A terrible feeling of loss and desolating loneliness came over me. Uncle Buno had become more than a part of my life. He *was* my life—I lived through him, seeing the world with his eyes and with something of his understanding. He had made it seem a very wonderful place.

I went back to my room to fight my misery in solitude.

I don't know how much later it was when I wandered into what had been Uncle Buno's room and found the neat stack of his canvases still there, and his palette, paint tubes, and brushes on the rack under the easel. They sent another stab of pain through me, and then I began to feel glad. At worst, he'd left something of himself behind. At best, surely it meant he intended to return eventually? He wouldn't just abandon the tools of his craft—I knew what painting meant to him.

I mentioned it to Pop.

He said: "I paid him in advance for two years' tuition for you. He spent the credits on Mars before he came—mostly on household things for his wife. So he still owes me a year's work. Or owed, rather."

"Owed?"

"He offered his paintings and materials in lieu of returning the credits. I accepted. They're no use to me, of course, but maybe you can use 'em."

"Oh, father—couldn't you have let him off for that one year?"

My father looked at me strangely, and then looked away. "Uncle Buno was not like the general run of Martians. He had pride. He didn't want to take something for nothing."

Yes, that was like Uncle Buno. But somehow I felt something was being kept from me.

"Pop," I said, "did you send Uncle Buno home?"

He still wouldn't look at me. "Yes, Paul, I did."

I tried not to hate him. "But it wasn't his fault I'm so slow at learning. I was getting better at maths really I was."

He made no answer. That meant he didn't believe me. I wasn't sure that I believed myself. And that made me angrier.

I blurted out: "You never did care about me, and he did. That's what you didn't like about him. You don't want anybody to like me. You were jealous of him—that's why you sent him away."

He was surprisingly patient. Without raising his voice, he answered: "You're contradicting yourself there, son. You'll never learn maths until you learn to think logically. Better go out and get some air and cool off."

I ran out of the house, down into the valley, among the trees where it was quiet and I could be alone. I wandered there for hours, mentally composing letters to Uncle Buno. Sometimes I urged him to return, saying he could stay at the farm, because they were my friends there, and I would see him every day. Sometimes I hinted at my stowing away on a ship to Mars—maybe even Pop's ship—and coming to live with him and Aunt Jona. The plans were all childish, impracticable, and—illogical.

Nevertheless, I wrote actual letters very like them during the following weeks. I received but one answer. I came across it the other day, among my once cherished collection of interplanetary stamps. It said:

Dear Paul,

Thank you for your letters. I should like to return to Earth, but it isn't possible. Your Aunt Jona is well and sends you her love.

Uncle Buno.

That was all, in return for my pouring out my heart in my boyish, uninhibited letters. Aunt Jona sent her love but Uncle Buno didn't.

I responded indignantly, asking why he had requested me to write him at all, if my letters were to be largely ignored. He ignored that one completely—at least, no answer came.

I was miserable for a long time. I tried to paint, but without Uncle Buno's encouragement there seemed little point in it. When I compared my daubs with the work he'd left, there seemed even less point to it.

Sometimes I imagined him sitting before his easel, beside one of the stagnant canals, capturing the quiet mood of a Martian evening—the blue, star-pricked sky, the green scum on the canal contrasting with the orange desert all blending somehow into significant life on his canvas.

Then I would bite my lip and vow that, if Uncle Buno couldn't come to me, then I should go to him. Somehow I would get to Mars.

Every time Pop returned from Mars, I'd pounce to ask whether he'd seen Uncle Buno. Often he had not been near Buno's village. And when he had visited him, the report was always brief and unsatisfying. "Uncle Buno? Sure, he's rubbing along okay."

At such times I often noticed my father looked hurt, as though he were pained by my being more interested in Uncle Buno's affairs than his. I put it down to nothing more admirable than wounded vanity.

Eventually I went to college and found companionship. I even found what I thought was my vocation. It wasn't painting or art in any form or farming or any of the professions I thought I might adopt. It was the last thing I'd imagined I was fitted for—mathematics.

All the divisions of maths I'd struggled with and despaired of merged into one meaningful whole in my eighteenth year. Uncle Buno had been right all along. I had the gift. It had taken long to mature.

All the groundwork Uncle Buno had put in for me hadn't been wasted. It had taken root down there in my subconscious. Now suddenly it had flowered and borne fruit.

I spent most of a vacation studying for a degree in pure maths. Near the end of it I felt safe and sure enough to quit, put away my books, and loaf around.

Pop—who these days was a changed person, manifestly proud of my progress—was out in space, and I had the house to myself. I went into what had been Uncle Buno's room, dug out all of his paintings and arranged them as a one-man exhibition. I hadn't looked at them closely in years. As I sat scrutinizing them now, it seemed to me more than ever that they were works of genius.

I'd never lost my interest in art, and college had given me the opportunities to study the works of the masters, old and new. So I looked at Buno's work with some understanding of the way he'd handled the technical side of it, besides feeling the direct impact of the pictures.

I didn't think he had a thing to learn from any painter before or after Michelangelo.

A college buddy happened to be the son of an art dealer who combined the æsthetic and business senses. I got him to persuade his old man to come and take a look at a Martian's views of Earth. The novelty was the bait and it drew the dealer.

He came on a day which is a date in art history. Buno was officially "discovered." The dealer saw to it that it didn't remain just a personal discovery. He pushed Buno. It seemed odd to me that he had to do any pushing at all. I said to him one day: "Surely the pictures sell themselves? Why, you've only got to take one look at them—they hit you like a sunburst."

"There's an awful lot of people who don't know whether the sun's shining or not, Paul," he said. "The ones who do rarely have the money. It's the other kind we've got to sell the pictures to. If it weren't for the money, this game would have broken my heart long ago. Believe me, I'd like to have all the Bunos on my walls. But if I don't sell 'em, I soon shouldn't have any walls to hang them on."

It was years before Bunos became safe canvas currency among the rich and the big money came rolling in. At that time I was neck-deep in a course at the School of Astrogation and my respect for space-navigators rivalled that for artists. I'd imagined I had mastered maths. Now I realized I was still down in the foot-hills.

No wonder any space-skipper who knew anything at all was always polite to his navigator.

Father insisted the Buno paintings were mine and therefore the proceeds were also. I had other views about that, and just salted the cash away. I'd written Buno a couple of times about his growing fame on Earth, repeating that I'd be glad to see him. I should have, too, though I had plenty on my plate and my days were full. I wasn't a lonely kid any more. I had many friends now, and some close ones who shared my work. So when Uncle Buno failed to reply, I was disappointed but not heartbroken.

One day the dealer came right out to the School to see me. As we strolled under the elms in the sharp spring sunlight he said: "You have seven Bunos left, haven't you?"

"That's right. My favourites. I'm keeping them."

"Wouldn't you rather keep twenty-five thousand pounds? That's what I'll give you for them."

"My, my. Where have you been lately—slumming?"

"All right, Paul—thirty thousand."

"But I have a sentimental regard for this batch."

"How much is your sentiment worth—thirty-five thousand?"

I considered. "You can have six for that. One I must keep." I was thinking of the Valley Farm painting, the one Buno had been doing when I first met him.

The dealer sighed. "You're wasting your time on the wrong kind of figures here, Paul. You should have gone on the Stock Exchange. Hang onto that last one long enough and it'll be worth thirty-five thousand by itself—if the fashion doesn't change. That's what you've got to watch."

"To hell with fashion! 'Valley Farm' is worth precisely what I think it's worth and—believe it or not—I don't think in terms of money. If you want more Bunos why don't you go to Mars and buy them direct from the producer? I should have thought that by this time half your profession would be standing in line at his door."

The dealer coughed. "They all think Buno's signed up exclusively to me. I just let 'em think. Why haven't I gone? Space travel makes me sick."

"Send a representative, then."

"No, you don't understand, Paul. To make this game pay, you've got to balance one thing against another. You can have too much of a good thing. Rarity value counts more in this racket than in any other. To squeeze the last penny from this Buno panic we'll want him to produce no more than one painting a year. Genius or not, over-production will kill the market. Besides, the public is still sold on the Martian view of Earth angle. They don't give a darn about the Martian view of Mars. Tell you what you do. Get your pal to come back here and paint another twenty, say, and they'll keep him in luxury for the rest of his life. We'll peddle them out, one by one."

I thought that over, and said I'd write Buno. Then I thought it over some more. I wasn't bothered about squeezing out the last penny for Buno. I had plenty stashed away for him already. I'd planned to take it to him personally in the shape of Martian credits on my very first trip as a space-navigator. I felt I had a big debt to repay him.

Often I pictured the scene: my bursting in on them, in my new uniform, making Buno happy because his faith in my mathematical ability had been vindicated, making Jona happy because she would be able to buy all the household gadgets she'd ever fancied.



How we'd talk ! In Martian too, for I was really glib in that tongue now.

But the more I thought about it, the more remote that happy picture seemed. I was moving on very slippery ground at the School of Astrogation and not always forward. Maybe I'd been over-ambitious. I had a talent for maths certainly, but was it good enough to carry me into the ranks of the select band of navigators ?

When I learned that nineteen out of twenty students, on the average, were plowed, I sweated.

Yes, I wanted Uncle Buno to come back. Not just for his kindness or his company. Not even for his own sake, that he might reap his reward in fame and money on Earth. But for my sake, because I

needed to be helped like a lame dog over a stile. I knew he was my last chance. None other could make the enormously advanced mathematics intelligible to me. Without further guidance from him I knew in my heart I should never become a space-navigator.

So I wrote him at once, telling him all this, imploring him to come back. I pointed out that there would be no difficulty about a permit to stay, for he was a world celebrity now and everyone would welcome him with open arms. The Ministry of Culture would make his path easy, ankle-deep in rose petals.

Not long after I'd mailed the letter, Pop dropped over to the School to see how I was making out. I was frank about it, and told him I'd written to Buno, and why I had.

He said: "Paul, I wish you hadn't done that."

"But you *do* still want me to become a navigator?"

"Sure. But not at the cost of Buno's life."

"What?"

"You haven't met any other Martians but Buno, Paul?"

"No, I haven't."

"There are a couple working at the Washington Spaceport. Take a look at them if you're ever that way. Then you may learn why the Immigration Board aren't so hard-hearted as you'd supposed, and why the two-year limit obtains. Those two Martians look like bent old men and move like tortoises, yet neither is as old as Buno. If they hadn't been near the starvation level, it would have been no charity to give them terrestrial jobs."

"But why, Pop?"

"Gravity drag, of course. It's nearly three times what they're used to, you know. I suppose you never thought of that because Buno never showed us any sign of it. He wouldn't. I told you—he has pride."

I thought of Buno's stiff, upright back and the effort it must have cost him.

"It gets their hearts," said Pop. "A Martian heart isn't meant to pump all that extra weight of blood."

"Was there anything wrong with Buno's heart?"

"He wouldn't admit it, but I had him examined. The doctor said he wouldn't last another six months on Earth. So I sent Buno back home at once. He didn't want to go right away. He thought he could get you to understand maths pretty soon. Maybe he was right, but I couldn't take the risk."

I tried to look into his eyes but he stared up at the school facade, pretending an interest in architecture. Was it a tradition of space-

skippers, I wondered, to regard kindness as softness and try to conceal it? It was clear now from Buno's portrait that the Martian had understood my father better than I ever had.

I remembered my childish attack on Pop for sending Buno home, my accusing him of jealousy. Yet Pop had given up his life's chief hope to avoid risking the life of one of a supposedly lesser breed. How could I do less? Figuratively, I waved goodbye to a career in space, and said: "I'll write him express, Pop, and tell him not to come."

"Good," said Pop, quietly. He lowered his gaze and I saw that he looked very like his portrait.

I wrote Buno urgently, trying to counter all my arguments in my last letter. If he had any regard for me, I said, then stay put. I would soon come and see him—as a passenger. The express letter I reckoned, would get there a trifle before the one in the slow ordinary mail.

Therefore as I approached the house on the first day of my next vacation I was shocked when I saw him standing at the bottom of the garden and gazing out over the valley.

I dropped my baggage and hurried over to him. He heard me coming, turned, smiled—the same old warm, friendly smile.

"Buno!" I cried. "Didn't you get my letter?"

He continued to smile. "I got them both, Paul. You're in trouble. I had to come."

"But—"

He waved a deprecating hand. "I feel fine. I've seen the doctor. He says a month on Earth shouldn't hurt. That'll be time enough to get you well on to the home stretch."

"You shouldn't have come," I said, lamely. Gratitude and fear conflicted within me and sapped my spontaneity. I fumbled for his hand, clasped it, said "Thanks," and could think of nothing else to say except a perfunctory inquiry about Jona.

Pop would be out in space for all of two months yet and wouldn't even learn of Buno's visit until it was over.

Later, after a drink in the house, I loosened up and we really got talking, first about old times, then about painting. And then Buno made me unpack my maths books and notes, and out came the log tables, the slide rule, and a mass of graph paper, and he said seriously: "Time's short, Paul, so let's get started."

We got started. That was all. The 'phone began ringing and cars came rolling up the drive as regularly as though the house were a filling station. Buno had travelled incognito, so there had been no press reception at the space-port. But somehow his arrival had got around and the interviewers had tracked him here.

After all, he was probably the world's most famous artist now and had never been interviewed before. The reporters made up for lost time. He bore them patiently. I was glad for him because of this recognition, yet I kept wishing he'd raise a hand, say "That's enough, now," throw them all out—and attend to me.

But I had to write the rest of that day off and all of the next—when TV cameras came peering round the house like inquisitive robots.

It died away at last. Buno began to coach me in earnest. This time it was different. This time I wanted to learn. So I did—and fast.

On the eve of the first day of the examination session I said goodbye to Buno, adding: "I'll be back in a week with my navigator's ticket in my wallet."

"I'll be waiting," Buno smiled.

After the session the candidates had to stick around the School for another two days, awaiting the results. We passed the time mostly in one bar or another till at last the typewritten sheet was tacked up on the green baize. Then we returned to the bars, some of us to celebrate, some of us to drown our sorrows.

I was celebrating. I had cleared the first, and higher, of the two hurdles. I'd passed Space Navigation, Theory. Space Navigation, Practical, would be easy. I'd always been able to use my fingers pretty well—except for counting on.

Then I stopped hitting the bottle and drove home all the afternoon and half the evening and, surprisingly, didn't hit anything else either, except ninety.

A good percentage of alcohol in the blood always makes me feel fonder of people than I am normally. The house seemed full of rosy mist and I swam through it, from room to room, seeking Buno and calling blurrily: "Uncle Buno, I love you!"

He was in his own room sitting beside his easel. A part-done canvas rested there. The sunset glowed beyond the window and he seemed to be studying it. One hand held a brush. His palette lay on the floor before him.

I was full of tipsy *camaraderie* and affection. I slapped him on the back.

"Buno, old man, we've done it."

He tilted stiffly forward. He held the brush tightly and did not put out a hand to save himself. His face hit the floor, hard, half on the palette. He rolled sideways, one leg raised in the air a little, the colours of the rainbow smeared across his face, his white hair standing up fuzzily.

It was dreadfully reminiscent of the climax of a circus clown act.

But the sight of the blob of crimson lake on the cornea of an eye that was wide open wasn't at all funny.

Such a shock is supposed to sober one at once. But it only made me more confused.

Strangely, it took a tumbler of near-neat Scotch to steady me enough to take another look at Uncle Buno.

At least two previous sunsets must have flamed and died before his sightless eyes while he'd been sitting there. Now this one died too while I sat sobbing over him.

The doctor came sometime around midnight. I suppose I must have 'phoned him. I don't remember.

"It was his heart, I guess," he said.

I nodded heavily, still maudlin. "It was his heart," I said. "It was too big."

In due course I became a space-navigator. My ship was the *Flagstaff*, almost as new as my uniform. Pop came to see me off on my maiden flight—to Mars. He was as pleased and as excited as I was, but there was something on his mind.

He asked: "You're still calling on Jona?"

"Of course, Pop. How could I dodge it?"

"She won't be glad to see you, son. Best skip it."

"I'd never feel right about it if I did."

"She's okay, Paul. Thanks to your sending her those credits, she's the richest woman on Mars now."

"And the bitterest."

"Yes. And the bitterest. So stay away from her."

I shrugged. We'd had the argument before, and we each had our own answer, and no talk could change it now.

I didn't think much about it on the trip. The skipper was newly promoted too, and a worrying type. He was dubious about the new ship, dubious about the new navigator, and dubious about the new skipper. The latter he wouldn't admit, the ship couldn't hear him, and so I got the brunt of it all. He had me re-checking our position so often that I found myself nail-biting as much as he.

The landing came as a distinct relief.

But then Mars began to play its part in getting me down. It wasn't unattractive at first sight—the orange sandstone houses in the orange sandy desert, the still-surfaced canals, the cloudless blue sky.

But there was a pervading darkness about it. After a bit, you felt you were wearing smoked spectacles. At the time the planet was fifty million miles further away than Earth from the sun, which despite the thin clear air, gave noticeably less light.

The dark blue of the sky was too dark: it looked as though it had been painted with a brush previously used for black and not properly cleaned. The same shadow seemed to lay behind the other colours, of which there were few, for there were no flowers on Mars and the inhabitants dressed and lived drably.

You always felt it was the moment of dawn and subconsciously waited for the sun to rise. But, of course, it never became any lighter. The disappointment nagged, irrationally, breeding irritation. The tenuous atmosphere didn't help. You could breathe it, but only if you stood still and gulped. If you walked half a dozen paces you began to flounder like a landed fish. So most of the time you wore an oxygen mask, spoke muffledly, and had trouble with saliva.

Buno's village was like all the other Martian villages I'd seen, and his house was like all the other houses in the village. I had expected something better. Buno had been one of the few Martians to bring Earth credits back. And it was months now since I had sent Jona a fortune. Yet there were three cracked and patched window-panes.

In this village Buno was born. I doubted if the scene had changed since that day. Buno had grown up here with little to see but the harsh ochre plain and the slate-coloured canal. Yet he had become one of the greatest painters of all time.

Geniuses, I reflected, truly have an inner eye which sees a world beyond the material one.

Often in imagination I'd pictured myself approaching this house, smart in my new navigator's uniform. Now the reality was here—but the circumstances were miserably different.

I shrank from the encounter to come. But I knew I had to go through with it.

The door stood ajar, thick with its insulation against the freezing Martian night. I hesitated before it, feeling suddenly doubtful about the almost comically outsize bunch of flowers I carried. The problem of just the right present had worried me. All I'd learned that Jona prized were terrestrial household gadgets. But these were obtainable in any of the bigger Martian stores. I could only presume that now she was rich she already possessed all she needed in that line.

I badly wanted to say and do the right things. It would be all wrong to say: "Jona, I'm sorry. It's my fault you're a widow. Please accept this as a token of my regret"—and then hand her a vacuum cleaner.

Hence the flowers, beautiful and rare. Probably there were no flowers on Mars at the moment except these, brought from Earth, the life in them carefully and expensively preserved.

I had made no sound, but the door was pulled slowly open from

within. And there Jona stood watching me. I had noticed that sometimes Buno had sensed my approach without actually seeing or hearing me. Apparently his wife shared the faculty.

Like he, she was tall, thin, white-haired, with pink-rimmed but steady eyes—unnervingly steady now.

"I'm Paul," I blurted, indistinctly through my mask. "I—I brought you these."

I held out the flowers. She took them solemnly and silently. Now that my hands were empty I didn't know what to do with them. I stuck them in my pockets but felt that was impolite and withdrew them. Then they felt like a pair of silly, dangling appendages.

She watched me unblinkingly. Somehow I felt like a kid dressed up in his father's uniform.

"I came to say how sorry I am about Uncle Buno," I said, in my best Martian but still muffled by that damned oxygen mask. "I feel, you know, it was all my fault."

She nodded gravely, which didn't help at all. Pa had said she was bitter. I knew that many of the Martians were bitter towards our race, because they'd reached their apex of material civilization with the canal system, and then fallen away from it without ever having mastered space travel.

They'd failed to escape from their dying world and were dying with it. Whereas we, a younger race, were possessed of a rich, living world and yet could leave it whenever we chose. They resented our vigour, our youth, our wealth, our power, and they chose to pretend we liked to flaunt them in their faces. They had one hell of an inferiority complex, together with its concomitant pride.

But Jona had a personal reason to be bitter. I'd rather she showed it, screamed and clawed, than gravely agree with my self-accusations. It made me feel so completely condemned, that atonement or forgiveness were not to be considered.

She made no move to invite me in.

I clasped and unclasped my useless hands, then said all in a rush: "Uncle Buno was the greatest man I ever knew. And the kindest. I could never repay what I owe him. But I should like to be the first to write his biography. Of course, I can't presume to judge his works. That must be left to someone better qualified. I just want to describe what sort of *person* he was, what he thought of life and art and so forth. I was wondering if he left any personal papers that I might borrow for the purpose. I promise you I'll be most discreet and publish nothing without your approval."

My voice died away because Jona was regarding me with such intensity that I wondered whether I was exciting her enthusiasm or her hatred.

She nodded sharply, and said in a strangled sort of voice: "Wait."

She closed the door to. A couple of minutes later she reappeared, thrust a small cloth-bound book into my hands and then shut the door between us with finality.

I sighed, half with relief, half with regret. I looked at the book. The neatly formed Martian writing was recognizably Buno's. It appeared to be a volume of a private journal. It began, I noted, on the day Buno returned to Earth from Mars.

I leafed through it and it was as though the book became a living viper in my hands. Phrase after phrase darted out at me like a forked, venomous tongue.

"That pampered little fool, Paul . . . No wonder the mother abandoned her idiot child . . . The humiliation of having to be civil to him . . . Trying to get simple self-evident facts through his thick skull was like trying to push your finger through a wall . . . His father is a typical specimen of that culturally backward race, arrogant because they were handed paradise on a plate . . . Another infuriating letter today from the moronic Paul . . ."

I snapped the book shut, crushing those hurtful fangs back in there. The blind-windowed house, itself tightly shut, seemed to sway before me. But it was I who was rocking. The poison had entered my bloodstream and the shock was beginning.

Somehow I blundered away in an erratic curve, which, as it lengthened, revealed to me the area back of the house. And there was a pit half full of smashed terrestrial gadgets: a refrigerator, a washing machine, a cooker, cleaners, things large and small. As I looked at them as dully and uncomprehendingly as the moron *he'd* said I was, a back-door opened and my offering of flowers was tossed out, into the pit.

I never even glimpsed Jona's hand. Perhaps because of the silly, childish tears filling my eyes. I turned away again, seeking blindly for the haven of the ship, and the tears wouldn't stop but ran over the oxygen mask and besprinkled my stiff new uniform.

In my pain I lost my precarious grip on the art of walking under the Martian gravity. My feet became almost beyond control and lifted me in high-floating steps. Altogether, bouncing, zig-zagging, and blubbering, I must have looked ridiculous. All-conquering Earthman! No doubt I was a joke to the Martian villagers, behind their closed windows, and balm to their bruised egos.

The Captain was as fretful as ever on the voyage back, but this time I was glad of it. The constant neurotic double-checkings helped to

save me from too much brooding about Buno and Jona and their contemptuous rejection of me.

When I got home I wasn't at first going to tell Pop about it. But the mystery nagged at me like an aching nerve. Why? I'd thought Buno had, in his way, loved me, risked his life to help me—and lost it. Then *why* . . .? Why in his recorded private thoughts did he seldom mention me without a dislike at times amounting to hatred? Only Pop might know. So I told him about it, after all.

He read the Journal slowly, because he wasn't all that good at Martian.

When he laid it aside at last, I asked: "Well? Can you explain why he was such a great man and yet so two-faced?"

Pop smiled faintly. "That combination isn't peculiar to Martians. Think of Richard Wagner. No—don't. It would be a false comparison. Buno was never two-faced. He was just two persons."

"What do you mean?"

"Paul, I once mentioned that pair of Martians working at Washington Spaceport. Have you ever conversed with them? I have. The gravity drag cripples them. In time it will kill them. But they are calm and amiable. Yet the average Martian—*on Mars*—is suspicious, envious, spiteful, always beefing. We're so largely the creatures of our environment, you see."

I reflected, then said: "Buno, in the Journal, kept referring to Earth as paradise. As *Paradise Lost*, in fact. It was almost as though he blamed you for dispossessing him."

"Yes, Paul, it was sheer jealousy, and you became the focal point of that jealousy. Buno was a born artist. But he never became an inspired one until he saw Earth, with its beautifully coloured flora and fauna, its landscapes and—above all—its cloudscapes and sunsets. He'd never seen such marvellous play of light before. What a contrast to Mars, with its weak sunlight, its cloudless sky of one monotonous hue, its feeble range of colour . . . In the Journal there are two whole pages of ecstasy about a remembered rainbow."

"I know, Pop. But why did he pick on me?"

"You're the lad he would have given everything to be, with all Earth to paint and all a lifetime to do it. He could never hope to live here for more than a few months, *in toto*. He envied your opportunities, despised you because you couldn't make use of them the way he would have done."

I sighed. "And all that was fermenting in him while I thought he was helping me only from kindness."

"It didn't ferment in him *here*," said Pop. "Only on Mars. Here he *was* kind and helpful. He was two different people in two different

places. To some extent we all are. On Mars I always feel depressed and take things hard. I expect you did too. And it's a lot tougher for the Martians—it was toughest of all for Buno, with his artistic temperament. I think the thin Martian air is mostly to blame: the Martians are oxygen-starved. It devitalizes them, makes them morose and irritable. It would do the same for us, if it weren't for the oxygen masks."

"Then we should supply all Martians with oxygen masks."

Pop shrugged. "There's more to it than oxygen. There's some other element missing from their atmosphere which we have. Maybe one of the inert gases. Maybe some other infinitesimal but important constituent that gives our air sparkle. Buno breathed freely and saw clearly in his short time on Earth. On Mars he was sick physically and in his soul, like the others. Think of him always as you knew him, when he was healthy."

"I shall," I said, picking up the Journal. "I'm going to burn this." I hesitated. "Let's face it, Pop, he didn't return to Earth just to help me."

"That's right, son. And so you can't be blamed. Your letter was the excuse he needed. He wanted to see Earth again before he died, and paint again, because Mars was making him impotent as an artist. Painting was his life. He came back to Earth to live—and die."

"It was hard on Jona."

"Yes. She loved him, and I think he loved her—but not so much as he loved art. Now she curses everything terrestrial. Earth stole away her husband."

"I'd hate her to go on feeling that way for the rest of her life. Do you think, Pop, we can ever persuade her to come and stay with us for a short holiday, just so that we can meet the real Jona? And she can meet the real us?"

Pop shook his head. "Never. But there's one hope. There's a plan already under way to re-oxygenate the whole Martian atmosphere. Oxygen can be recovered from the deserts there. We must make our scientists understand that's still not enough. They've got to track down the other vital element in our atmosphere, and introduce that. That's the one way we can help Jona."

"You're right, Pop." I thought a little while, and became conscious of the kindling of a purpose. I added, quietly: "It's the only way we can repay Uncle Buno, too."

—William F. Temple

Every once in a while a really outstanding fantasy story appears by an American writer which lends itself just as admirably to British publication. It is therefore with considerable pleasure that we introduce Jerome Bixby, well-known in USA as a musician, artist and editor, in what we believe is his first published story in a British magazine.

IT'S A GOOD LIFE

By **JEROME BIXBY**

Illustrated by QUINN

Aunt Amy was out on the front porch, rocking back and forth in the highbacked chair and fanning herself, when Bill Soames rode his bicycle up the road and stopped in front of the house.

Perspiring under the afternoon "sun," Bill lifted the box of groceries out of the big basket over the front wheel of the bike, and came up the front walk.

Little Anthony was sitting on the lawn, playing with a rat. He had caught the rat down in the basement—he had made it think that it

smelled cheese, the most rich-smelling and crumbly-delicious cheese a rat had ever thought it smelled, and it had come out of its hole, and now Anthony had hold of it with his mind and was making it do tricks.

When the rat saw Bill Soames coming, it tried to run, but Anthony thought at it, and it turned a flip-flop on the grass, and lay trembling, its eyes gleaming in small black terror.

Bill Soames hurried past Anthony and reached the front steps, mumbling. He always mumbled when he came to the Fremont house, or passed it by, or even thought of it. Everybody did. They thought about silly things, things that didn't mean very much, like two-and-two-is-four-and-twice-is-eight and so on; they tried to jumble up their thoughts and keep them skipping back and forth, so Anthony couldn't read their minds. The mumbling helped. Because if Anthony got anything strong out of your thought, he might take a notion to do something about it—like curing your wife's sick headaches or your kid's mumps, or getting your old milk cow back on schedule, or fixing the privy. And while Anthony mightn't actually mean any harm, he couldn't be expected to have much notion of what was the right thing to do in such cases.

That was if he liked you. He might try to help you, in his way. And that could be pretty horrible.

If he didn't like you . . . well, that could be worse.

Bill Soames set the box of groceries on the porch railing, and stopped his mumbling long enough to say, "Everythin' you wanted, Miss Amy."

"Oh, fine, William," Amy Fremont said lightly. "My ain't it terrible hot today?"

Bill Soames almost cringed. His eyes pleaded with her. He shook his head violently *no*, and then interrupted his mumbling again, though obviously he didn't want to: "Oh, don't say that, Miss Amy . . . it's fine, just fine. A real *good* day!"

Amy Fremont got up from the rocking chair, and came across the porch. She was a tall woman, thin, a smiling vacancy in her eyes. About a year ago, Anthony had gotten mad at her, because she'd told him he shouldn't have turned the cat into a cat-rug, and although he had always obeyed her more than anyone else, which was hardly at all, this time he'd snapped at her. With his mind. And that had been the end of Amy Fremont's bright eyes, and the end of Amy Fremont as everyone had known her. And that was when word got around in Peaksville (population: 46) that even the members of Anthony's own family weren't safe. After that, everyone was twice as careful.

Someday Anthony might undo what he'd done to Aunt Amy. Anthony's Mom and Pop hoped he would. When he was older, and



maybe sorry. If it was possible, that is. Because Aunt Amy had changed a lot, and besides, now Anthony wouldn't obey anyone.

"Land alive, William," Aunt Amy said, "you don't have to mumble like that. Anthony wouldn't hurt you. My goodness, Anthony likes you!" She raised her voice and called to Anthony, who had tired of the rat and was making it eat itself. "Don't you, dear? Don't you like Mr. Soames?"

Anthony looked across the lawn at the grocery man—a bright, wet, purple gaze. He didn't say anything. Bill Soames tried to smile at him. After a second Anthony returned his attention to the rat. It had already devoured its tail, or at least chewed it off—for Anthony

had made it bite faster than it could swallow, and little pink and red furry pieces lay around it on the green grass. Now the rat was having trouble reaching its hindquarters.

Mumbling silently, thinking of nothing in particular as hard as he could, Bill Soames went stiff-legged down the walk mounted his bicycle and pedalled off.

"We'll see you tonight, William," Aunt Amy called after him.

As Bill Soames pumped the pedals, he was wishing deep down that he could pump twice as fast, to get away from Anthony all the faster, and away from Aunt Amy, who sometimes just forgot how *careful* you had to be. And he shouldn't have thought that. Because Anthony caught it. He caught the desire to get away from the Fremont house as if it was something *bad*, and his purple gaze blinked, and he snapped a small, sulky thought after Bill Soames—just a small one, because he was in a good mood today, and besides, he liked Bill Soames, or at least didn't dislike him, at least today. Bill Soames wanted to go away—so, petulantly, Anthony helped him.

Pedalling with superhuman speed—or rather, appearing to, because in reality the bicycle was pedalling *him*—Bill Soames vanished down the road in a cloud of dust, his thin, terrified wail drifting back across the summerlike heat.

Anthony looked at the rat. It had devoured half its belly, and had died from pain. He thought it into a grave out deep in the cornfield—his father had once said, smiling, that he might as well do that with the things he killed—and went around the house, casting his odd shadow in the hot, grassy light from above.

In the kitchen, Aunt Amy was unpacking the groceries. She put the Mason-jarred goods on the shelves, and the meat and milk in the icebox, and the beet sugar and coarse flour in big cans under the sink. She put the cardboard box in the corner, by the door, for Mr. Soames to pick up next time he came. It was stained and battered and torn and worn fuzzy, but it was one of the few left in Peaksville. In faded red letters it said *Campbell's Soup*. The last cans of soup, or of anything else, had been eaten long ago, except for a small communal hoard which the villagers dipped into for special occasions—but the box lingered on, like a coffin, and when it and the other boxes were gone, the men would have to make some out of wood.

Aunt Amy went out in back, where Anthony's Mom—Aunt Amy's sister—sat in the shade of the house, shelling peas. The peas, every time Mom ran a finger along a pod, went *lollop-lollop-lollop* into the pan on her lap.

"William brought the groceries," Aunt Amy said. She sat down wearily in the straightbacked chair beside Mom, and began fanning herself again. She wasn't really old; but ever since Anthony had snapped at her with his mind, something had seemed to be wrong with her body as well as her mind, and she was tired all the time.

"Oh, good," said Mom. *Lollop* went the fat peas into the pan.

Everybody in Peaksville always said "Oh fine," or "Good," or "Say, that's swell!" when almost anything happened or was mentioned—even unhappy things like accidents or even deaths. They'd always say "Good," because if they didn't try to cover up how they really felt, Anthony might overhear with his mind and then nobody knew what might happen. Like the time Mrs. Kent's husband, Sam, had come walking back from the graveyard, because Anthony liked Mrs. Kent and had heard her mourning.

Lollop.

"Tonight's television night," said Aunt Amy. "I'm glad. I look forward to it so much every week. I wonder what we'll see tonight?"

"Did Bill bring the meat?" asked Mom.

"Yes." Aunt Amy fanned herself, looking up at the featureless brassy glare of the sky. "Goodness, it's so hot! I wish Anthony would make it just a little cooler—" . .

"Amy!"

"Oh!" Mom's sharp tone had penetrated, where Bill Soames' agonized expression had failed. Aunt Amy put one thin hand to her mouth in exaggerated alarm. "Oh . . . I'm sorry, dear." Her pale blue eyes shuttled around, right and left, to see if Anthony was in sight. Not that it would make any difference if he was or wasn't—he didn't have to be near you to know what you were thinking. Usually, though, unless he had his attention on somebody, he would be occupied with thoughts of his own.

But some things attracted his attention—you could never be sure just what.

"This weather's just *fine*," Mom said.

Lollop.

"Oh, yes," Aunt Amy said. "It's a wonderful day. I wouldn't want it changed for the world!"

Lollop.

Lollop.

"What time is it?" Mom asked.

Aunt Amy was sitting where she could see through the kitchen window to the alarm clock on the shelf above the stove. "Four-thirty," she said.

Lollop.

"I want tonight to be something special," Mom said. "Did Bill bring a good lean roast?"

"Good and lean, dear. They butchered just today, you know, and sent us over the best piece."

"Dan Hollis will be *so* surprised when he finds out that tonight's television party is a birthday party for him too!"

"Oh *I* think he will! Are you sure nobody's told him?"

"Everybody swore they wouldn't."

"That'll be real nice," Aunt Amy nodded, looking off across the cornfield. "A birthday party."

"Well—" Mom put the pan of peas down beside her, stood up and brushed her apron. "I'd better get the roast on. Then we can set the table." She picked up the peas.

Anthony came around the corner of the house. He didn't look at them, but continued on down through the carefully kept garden—all the gardens in Peaksville were carefully kept, very carefully kept—and went past the rustling, useless hulk that had been the Fremont family car, and went smoothly over the fence and out into the cornfield.

"Isn't this a lovely day!" said Mom, a little loudly, as they went toward the back door.

Aunt Amy fanned herself. "A beautiful day, dear. Just *fine*!"

Out in the cornfield, Anthony walked between the tall, rustling rows of green stalks. He liked to smell the corn. The alive corn overhead, and the old dead corn underfoot. Rich Ohio earth, thick with weeds and brown, dry-rotting ears of corn, pressed between his bare toes with every step—he had made it rain last night so everything would smell and feel nice today.

He walked clear to the edge of the cornfield, and over to where a grove of shadowy green trees covered cool, moist, dark ground, and lots of leafy undergrowth, and jumbled moss-covered rocks, and a small spring that made a clear, clean pool. Here Anthony liked to rest and watch the birds and insects and small animals that rustled and scampered and chirped about. He liked to lie on the cool ground and look up through the moving greenness overhead, and watch the insects flit in the hazy soft sunbeams that stood like slanting, glowing bars between ground and treetops. Somehow, he liked the thoughts of the little creatures in this place better than the thoughts outside; and while the thoughts he picked up here weren't very strong or very clear, he could get enough out of them to know what the little creatures liked and wanted, and he spent a lot of time making the grove more like what they wanted it to be. The spring hadn't always been here; but one time he had found thirst in one small furry mind, and had brought

subterranean water to the surface in a clear cold flow, and had watched blinking as the creature drank, feeling its pleasure. Later he had made the pool, when he found a small urge to swim.

He had made rocks and trees and bushes and caves, and sunlight here and shadows there, because he had felt in all the tiny minds around him the desire—or the instinctive want—for this kind of resting place, and that kind of mating place, and this kind of place to play, and that kind of home.

And somehow the creatures from all the fields and pastures around the grove had seemed to know that this was a good place, for there were always more of them coming in—every time Anthony came out here there were more creatures than the last time, and more desires and needs to be tended to. Every time there would be some kind of creature he had never seen before, and he would find its mind, and see what it wanted, and then give it to it.

He liked to help them. He liked to feel their simple gratification.

Today, he rested beneath a thick elm, and lifted his purple gaze to a red and black bird that had just come to the grove. It twittered on a branch over his head, and hopped back and forth, and thought its tiny thoughts, and Anthony made a big, soft nest for it, and pretty soon it hopped in.

A long, brown, sleek-furred animal was drinking at the pool. Anthony found its mind next. The animal was thinking about a smaller creature that was scurrying along the ground on the other side of the pool, grubbing for insects. The little creature didn't know that it was in danger. The long, brown animal finished drinking and tensed its legs to leap, and Anthony thought it into a grave in the cornfield.

He didn't like those kinds of thoughts. They reminded him of the thoughts outside the grove. A long time ago some of the people outside had thought that way about *him*, and one night they'd hidden and waited for him to come back from the grove—and he'd just thought them all into the cornfield. Since then, the rest of the people hadn't thought that way—at least, very clearly. Now their thoughts were all mixed up and confusing whenever they thought about him or near him, so he didn't pay much attention.

He liked to help them too, sometimes—but it wasn't simple, or very gratifying either. They never thought happy thoughts when he did—just the jumble. So he spent more time out here.

He watched all the birds and insects and furry creatures for a while, and played with a bird, making it soar and dip and streak madly around tree trunks until, accidentally, when another bird caught his attention for a moment, he ran it into a rock. Petulantly, he thought the rock into a grave in the cornfield; but he couldn't do anything more

with the bird. Not because it was dead, though it was; but because it had a broken wing. So he went back to the house. He didn't feel like walking back through the cornfield, so he just *went* to the house, right down into the basement.

It was nice down here. Nice and dark and damp and sort of fragrant, because once Mom had been making preserves in a rack along the far wall and then she'd stopped coming down ever since Anthony had started spending time here, and the preserves had spoiled and leaked down and spread over the dirt floor, and Anthony liked the smell.

He caught another rat, making it smell cheese, and after he played with it, he thought it into a grave right beside the long animal he'd killed in the grove. Aunt Amy hated rats, and so he killed a lot of them, because he liked Aunt Amy most of all and sometimes did things that Aunt Amy wanted. Her mind was more like the little furry minds out in the grove. She hadn't thought anything bad at all about him for a long time.

After the rat, he played with a big black spider in the corner under the stairs, making it run back and forth until its web shook and shimmered in the light from the cellar window like a reflection in silvery water. Then he drove fruit flies into the web until the spider was frantic trying to wind them all up. The spider liked flies, and its thoughts were stronger than theirs, so he did it. There was something bad in the way it liked flies, but it wasn't clear—and besides, Aunt Amy hated flies too.

He heard footsteps overhead—Mom moving around in the kitchen. He blinked his purple gaze, and almost decided to make her hold still—but instead he *went* up to the attic, and, after looking out the circular window at the front end of the long V-roofed room for a while at the front lawn and the dusty road and Henderson's tip-waving wheatfield beyond, he curled into an unlikely shape and went partly to sleep.

Soon people would be coming for television, he heard Mom think.

He went more to sleep. He liked television night. Aunt Amy had always liked television a lot, so one time he had thought some for her, and a few other people had been there at the time, and Aunt Amy had felt disappointed when they wanted to leave. He'd done something to them for that—and now everybody came to television.

He liked all the attention he got when they did.

Anthony's father came home around six-thirty, looking tired and dirty and bloody. He'd been over in Dun's pasture with the other men, helping pick out the cow to be slaughtered this month and doing the job, and then butchering the meat and salting it away in Soames's

icehouse. Not a job he cared for, but every man had his turn. Yesterday, he had helped scythe down old McIntyre's wheat. Tomorrow, they would start threshing. By hand. Everything in Peaksville had to be done by hand.

He kissed his wife on the cheek and sat down at the kitchen table. He smiled and said, "Where's Anthony?"

"Around someplace," Mom said.

Aunt Amy was over at the wood-burning stove, stirring the big pot of peas. Mom went back to the oven and opened it and basted the roast.

"Well, it's been a *good* day," Dad said. By rote. Then he looked at the mixing bowl and breadboard on the table. He sniffed at the dough. "M'm," he said. "I could eat a loaf all by myself, I'm so hungry."

"No one told Dan Hollis about its being a birthday party, did they?" his wife asked.

"Nope. We kept as quiet as mummies."

"We've fixed up such a lovely surprise!"

"Um? What?"

"Well . . . you know how much Dan likes music. Well, last week Thelma Dunn found a *record* in her attic!"

"No!"

"Yes! And we had Ethel sort of ask—you know, without really *asking*—if he had that one. And he said no. Isn't that a wonderful surprise?"

"Well, now, it sure is. A record, imagine! That's a real nice thing to find! What record is it?"

"Perry Como, singing *You Are My Sunshine*."

"Well, I'll be darned. I always liked that tune." Some raw carrots were lying on the table. Dad picked up a small one, scrubbed it on his chest, and took a bite. "How did Thelma happen to find it?"

"Oh, you know—just looking around for new things."

"M'm." Dad chewed the carrot. "Say, who has that picture we found a while back? I kind of liked it—that old clipper sailing along—"

"The Smiths. Next week the Sipichs get it and they give the Smiths old McIntyre's music-box, and we give the Sipichs—" and she went down the tentative order of things that would exchange hands among the women at church this Sunday.

He nodded. "Looks like we can't have the picture for a while, I guess. Look, honey, you might try to get that detective book back from the Reillys. I was so busy the week we had it, I never got to finish all the stories—"

"I'll try," his wife said doubtfully. "But I hear the van Husens have a stereoscope they found in the cellar." Her voice was just a

little accusing. "They had it two whole months before they told anybody about it—"

"Say," Dad said, looking interested. "That'd be nice, too. Lots of pictures?"

"I suppose so. I'll see on Sunday. I'd like to have it—but we still owe the van Husens for their canary. I don't know why that bird had to pick *our* house to die . . . it must have been sick when we got it. Now there's just no satisfying Betty van Husen—she even hinted she'd like our *piano* for a while!"

"Well, honey, you try for the stereoscope—or just anything you think we'll like." At last he swallowed the carrot. It had been a little young and tough. Anthony's whims about the weather made it so that people never knew what crops would come up, or what shape they'd be in if they did. All they could do was plant a lot; and always enough of something came up any one season to live on. Just once there had been a grain surplus; tons of it had been hauled to the edge of Peaksville and dumped off into the nothingness. Otherwise, nobody could have breathed, when it started to spoil.

"You know," Dad went on. "It's nice to have the new things around. It's nice to think that there's probably still a lot of stuff nobody's found yet, in cellars and attics and barns and down behind things. They help, somehow. As much as anything can help—"

"Sh-h!" Mom glanced nervously around.

"Oh," Dad said, smiling hastily. "It's all right! The new things are *good*! It's *nice* to be able to have something around you've never seen before, and know that something you've given somebody else is making them happy . . . that's a real *good* thing."

"A good thing," his wife echoed.

"Pretty soon," Aunt Amy said, from the stove, "there won't be any more new things. We'll have found everything there is to find. Goodness, that'll be too bad—"

"Amy!"

"Well—" her pale eyes were shallow and fixed, a sign of her recurrent vagueness. "It will be kind of a shame—no new things—"

"Don't *talk* like that," Mom said, trembling. "Amy, be *quiet*!"

"It's *good*," said Dad, in the loud, familiar, wanting-to-be-overheard tone of voice. "Such talk is *good*. It's okay, honey—don't you see? It's good for Amy to talk any way she wants. It's good for her to feel bad. Everything's good. Everything *has* to be good . . ."

Anthony's mother was pale. And so was Aunt Amy—the peril of the moment had suddenly penetrated the clouds surrounding her mind. Sometimes it was difficult to handle words so that they might not prove disastrous. You just never *knew*. There were so many things it was



wise not to say, or even think—but remonstrance for saying or thinking them might be just as bad, if Anthony heard and decided to do anything about it. You could just never tell what Anthony was liable to do.

Everything had to be good. Had to be fine just as it was, even if it wasn't. Always. Because any change might be worse. So terribly much worse.

"Oh, my goodness, yes, of course it's good," Mom said. "You talk any way you want to, Amy, and it's just fine. Of course, you want to remember that some ways are *better* than others . . ."

Aunt Amy stirred the peas, frowning in her pale eyes.

"Oh, yes," she said. "But I don't feel like talking right now. It . . . it's *good* that I don't feel like talking."

Dad said tiredly, smiling, "I'm going out and wash up."

They started arriving around eight o'clock. By that time, Mom and Aunt Amy had the big table in the dining room set, and two more tables off to the side. The candles were burning, and the chairs situated, and Dad had a big fire going in the fireplace.

The first to arrive were the Sipichs, John and Mary. John wore his best suit, and was well-scrubbed and pink-faced after his day in McIntyre's pasture. The suit was neatly pressed, but getting threadbare at elbows and cuffs. Old McIntyre was working on a loom, designing it out of schoolbooks, but so far it was slow going. McIntyre was a capable man with wood and tools, but a loom was a big order when you couldn't get metal parts. McIntyre had been one of the ones who, at first, had wanted to try to get Anthony to make things the villagers needed, like clothes and canned goods and medical supplies and gasoline. Since then, he felt that what had happened to the whole Terrance family and Joe Kinney was his fault, and he worked hard trying to make it up to the rest of them. And since then, no one had tried to get Anthony to do anything.

Mary Sipich was a small, cheerful woman in a simple dress. She immediately set about helping Mom and Aunt Amy put the finishing touches on the dinner.

The next arrivals were the Smiths and Dunns, who lived right next to each other down the road, only a few yards from the nothingness. They drove up in the Smiths' wagon, drawn by their old horse.

Then the Reillys showed up, from across the darkened wheatfield, and the evening really began. Pat Reilly sat down at the big upright in the front room, and began to play from the popular sheet music on the rack. He played softly, as expressively as he could—and nobody sang. Anthony liked piano playing a whole lot, but not singing; often he would come up from the basement, or down from the attic, or just *come*, and sit on top of the piano, nodding his head as Pat played *Lover* or *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* or *Night and Day*. He seemed to prefer ballads, sweet-sounding songs—but the one time somebody had started to sing, Anthony had looked over from the top of the piano and done something that made everybody afraid of singing from then on. Later they'd decided that the piano was what Anthony had heard first, before anybody had ever tried to sing, and now anything else added to it didn't sound right and distracted him from his pleasure.

So, every television night, Pat would play the piano, and that was the beginning of the evening. Wherever Anthony was, the music would make him happy, and put him in a good mood, and he would know that they were gathering for television and waiting for him.

By eight-thirty everybody had shown up, except for the seventeen children and Mrs. Soames who was off watching them in the schoolhouse at the far end of town. The children of Peaksville were never, never allowed near the Fremont house—not since little Fred Smith had tried to play with Anthony on a dare. The younger children weren't even told about Anthony. The others had mostly forgotten

about him, or were told that he was a nice, nice goblin but they must never go near him.

Dan and Ethel Hollis came late, and Dan walked in not suspecting a thing. Pat Reilly had played the piano until his hands ached—he'd worked pretty hard with them today—and now he got up, and everybody gathered around to wish Dan Hollis a happy birthday.

"Well, I'll be darned," Dan grinned. "This is swell, I wasn't expecting this at all . . . gosh, this is *swell*!"

They gave him his presents—mostly things they had made by hand, though some were things that people had possessed as their own and now gave him as his. John Sipich gave him a watch charm, hand-carved out of a piece of hickory wood. Dan's watch had broken down a year or so ago, and there was nobody in the village who knew how to fix it, but he still carried it around because it had been his grandfather's and was a fine old heavy thing of gold and silver. He attached the charm to the chain, while everybody laughed and said John had done a nice job of carving. Then Mary Sipich gave him a knitted necktie, which he put on, removing the one he'd worn.

The Reillys gave him a little box they had made, to keep things in. They didn't say what things, but Dan said he'd keep his personal jewelry in it. The Reillys had made it out of a cigar box, carefully peeled of its paper and lined on the inside with velvet. The outside had been polished, and carefully if not expertly carved by Pat—but his carving got complimented too. Dan Hollis received many other gifts—a pipe, a pair of shoelaces, a tie pin, a knit pair of socks, some fudge, a pair of garters made from old suspenders.

He unwrapped each gift with vast pleasure, and wore as many of them as he could right there, even the garters. He lit up the pipe, and said he'd never had a better smoke; which wasn't quite true, because the pipe wasn't broken in yet. Pete Manners had had it lying around ever since he'd received it as a gift four years ago from an out-of-town relative who hadn't known he'd stopped smoking.

Dan put the tobacco into the bowl very carefully. Tobacco was precious. It was only pure luck that Pat Reilly had decided to try to grow some in his backyard just before what had happened to Peaksville had happened. It didn't grow very well, and then they had to cure it and shred it and all, and it was just precious stuff. Everybody in town used wooden holders old McIntyre had made, to save on butts.

Last of all, Thelma Dunn gave Dan Hollis the record she had found.

Dan's eyes misted even before he opened the package. He knew it was a record.

"Gosh," he said softly. "What one is it? I'm almost afraid to look . . ."

"You haven't got it, darling," Ethel Hollis smiled. "Don't you remember, I asked about *You Are My Sunshine*?"

"Oh, gosh," Dan said again. Carefully he removed the wrapping and stood there fondling the record, running his big hands over the worn grooves with their tiny, dulling crosswise scratches. He looked around the room, eyes shining, and they all smiled back, knowing how delighted he was.

"Happy birthday, darling!" Ethel said, throwing her arms around him and kissing him.

He clutched the record in both hands, holding it off to one side as she pressed against him. "Hey," he laughed, pulling back his head. "Be careful . . . I'm holding a priceless object!" He looked around again, over his wife's arms, which were still around his neck. His eyes were hungry. "Look . . . do you think we could play it? Lord, what I'd give to hear some new music . . . just the first part, the orchestra part, before Como sings?"

Faces sobered. After a minute, John Sipich said, "I don't think we'd better, Dan. After all, we don't know just where the singer comes in—it'd be taking too much of a chance. Better wait till you get home."

Dan Hollis reluctantly put the record on the buffet with all his other presents. "It's *good*," he said automatically, but disappointedly, "that I can't play it here."

"Oh, yes," said Sipich. "It's good." To compensate for Dan's disappointed tone, he repeated, "It's *good*."

They ate dinner, the candles lighting their smiling faces, and ate it all right down to the last delicious drop of gravy. They complimented Mom and Aunt Amy on the roast beef, and the peas and carrots, and the tender corn on the cob. The corn hadn't come from the Fremont's cornfield, naturally—everybody knew what was out there; and the field was going to weeds.

Then they polished off the dessert—homemade ice cream and cookies. And then they sat back, in the flickering light of the candles, and chatted waiting for television.

There never was a lot of mumbling on television night—everybody came and had a good dinner at the Fremonts', and that was nice, and afterwards there was television, and nobody really thought much about that—it just had to be put up with. So it was a pleasant enough get-together, aside from your having to watch what you said just as carefully as you always did everywhere. If a dangerous thought came into your mind, you just started mumbling, even right in the middle of a

sentence. When you did that, the others just ignored you until you felt happier again and stopped.

Anthony liked television night. He had done only two or three awful things on television night in the whole past year.

Mom had put a bottle of brandy on the table, and they each had a tiny glass of it. Liquor was even more precious than tobacco. The villagers could make wine, but the grapes weren't right, and certainly the techniques weren't, and it wasn't very good wine. There were only a few bottles of real liquor left in the village—four rye, three Scotch, three brandy, nine real wine and half a bottle of Drambuie belonging to old McIntyre (only for marriages)—and when those were gone, that was it.

Afterward, everybody wished that the brandy hadn't been brought out. Because Dan Hollis drank more of it than he should have, and mixed it with a lot of the home-made wine. Nobody thought anything about it at first, because he didn't show it much outside, and it was his birthday party and a happy party, and Anthony liked these get-togethers and shouldn't see any reason to do anything even if he was listening.

But Dan Hollis got high, and did a fool thing. If they'd seen it coming, they'd have taken him outside and walked him around.

The first thing they knew, Dan stopped laughing right in the middle of the story about how Thelma Dunn had found the Perry Como record and dropped it and it hadn't broken because she'd moved faster than she ever had before in her life and caught it. He was fondling the record again, and looking longingly at the Fremonts' gramophone over in the corner, and suddenly he stopped laughing and his face got slack, and then it got ugly, and he said, "Oh, *Christ*!"

Immediately the room was still. So still they could hear the whirring movement of the grandfather's clock out in the hall. Pat Reilly had been playing the piano, softly. He stopped, his hands poised over the yellowed keys.

The candles on the dining-room table flickered in a cool breeze that blew through the lace curtains over the bay window.

"Keep playing, Pat," Anthony's father said softly.

Pat started again. He played *Night and Day*, but his eyes were sidewise on Dan Hollis, and he missed notes.

Dan stood in the middle of the room, holding the record. In his other hand he held a glass of brandy so hard his hand shook.

They were all looking at him.

"*Christ*," he said again, and he made it sound like a dirty word.

Reverend Younger, who had been talking with Mom and Aunt Amy by the dining-room door, said "*Christ*" too—but he was using it in a prayer. His hands were clasped, and his eyes were closed.

John Sipich moved forward. "Now, Dan . . . it's *good* for you to talk that way. But you don't want to talk too much, you know."

Dan shook off the hand Sipich put on his arm.

"Can't even play my record," he said loudly. He looked down at the record, and then around at their faces. "Oh, my *God* . . ."

He threw the glassful of brandy against the wall. It splattered and ran down the wallpaper in streaks.

Some of the women gasped.

"Dan," Sipich said in a whisper. "Dan, cut it out—"

Pat Reilly was playing *Night and Day* louder, to cover up the sounds of the talk. It wouldn't do any good, though, if Anthony was listening.

Dan Hollis went over to the piano and stood by Pat's shoulder, swaying a little.

"Pat," he said. "Don't play *that*. Play *this*." And he began to sing. Softly, hoarsely, miserably: "Happy birthday to me Happy birthday to me . . ."

"Dan!" Ethel Hollis screamed. She tried to run across the room to him. Mary Sipich grabbed her arm and held her back. "Dan," Ethel screamed again. "Stop—"

"My God, be quiet!" hissed Mary Sipich, and pushed her toward one of the men, who put his hand over her mouth and held her still.

"—Happy Birthday, dear Danny," Dan sang. "Happy birthday to me!" He stopped and looked down at Pat Reilly. "Play it, Pat. Play it, so I can sing right . . . you know I can't carry a tune unless somebody plays it!"

Pat Reilly put his hands on the keys and began *Lover*—in a low waltz tempo, the way Anthony liked it. Pat's face was white. His hands fumbled.

Dan Hollis stared over at the dining-room door. At Anthony's mother, and at Anthony's father who had gone to join her.

"You had him," he said. Tears gleamed on his cheeks as the candlelight caught them. "You had to go and *have* him . . ."

He closed his eyes, and the tears squeezed out. He sang loudly, "You are my sunshine . . . my only sunshine . . . you make me happy . . . when I am blue . . ."

Anthony *came* into the room.

Pat stopped playing. He froze. Everybody froze. The breeze rippled the curtains. Ethel Hollis couldn't even try to scream—she had fainted.

"Please don't take my sunshine . . . away . . ." Dan's voice faltered into silence. His eyes widened. He put both hands out in

front of him, the empty glass in one, the record in the other. He hiccupped, and said, "No—"

"Bad man," Anthony said, and thought Dan Hollis into something like nothing anyone would have believed possible, and then he thought the thing into a grave deep, deep in the cornfield.

The glass and record thumped on the rug. Neither broke.

Anthony's purple gaze went around the room.

Some of the people began mumbling. They all tried to smile. The sound of mumbling filled the room like a far-off approval. Out of the murmuring came one or two clear voices :

"Oh, it's a very *good* thing," said John Sipich.

"A good thing," said Anthony's father, smiling. He'd had more practice in smiling than most of them. "A wonderful thing."

"It's swell . . . just swell," said Pat Reilly, tears leaking from eyes and nose, and he began to play the piano again, softly, his trembling hands feeling for *Night and Day*.

Anthony climbed up on top of the piano, and Pat played for two hours.

Afterward, they watched television. They all went into the front room, and lit just a few candles, and pulled up chairs around the set. It was a small-screen set, and they couldn't all sit close enough to it to see, but that didn't matter. They didn't even turn the set on. It wouldn't have worked anyway, there being no electricity in Peaksville.

They just sat silently, and watched the twisting, writhing shapes on the screen, and listened to the sounds that came out of the speaker, and none of them had any idea of what it was all about. They never did. It was always the same.

"It's real nice," Aunt Amy said once, her pale eyes on the meaningless flickers and shadows. "But I liked it a little better when there were cities outside and we could get real—"

"Why, Amy!" said Mom. "It's good for you to say such a thing. Very good. But how can you mean it? Why, this television is *much* better than anything we ever used to get!"

"Yes," chimed in John Sipich. "It's fine. It's the best show we've ever seen!"

He sat on the couch, with two other men, holding Ethel Hollis flat against the cushions, holding her arms and legs and putting their hands over her mouth, so she couldn't start screaming again.

"It's really *good*!" he said again.

Mom looked out of the front window, across the darkened road, across Henderson's darkened wheat field to the vast, endless, gray nothingness in which the little village of Peaksville floated like a soul

—the huge nothingness that was most evident at night, when Anthony's brassy day had gone.

It did no good to wonder where they were . . . no good at all. Peaksville was just someplace. Someplace away from the world. It was wherever it had been since that day three years ago when Anthony had crept from her womb and old Doc Bates—God rest him—had screamed and dropped him and tried to kill him, and Anthony had whined and done the thing. Had taken the village someplace. Or had destroyed the world and left only the village, nobody knew which.

It did no good to wonder about it. Nothing at all did any good—except to live as they must live. Must always, always live, if Anthony would let them.

These thoughts were dangerous, she thought.

She began to mumble. The others started mumbling too. They had all been thinking, evidently.

The men on the couch whispered and whispered to Ethel Hollis and when they took their hands away, she mumbled too.

While Anthony sat on top of the set and made television, they sat around and mumbled and watched the meaningless, flickering shapes far into the night.

Next day it snowed, and killed off half the crops—but it was a *good* day.

—Jerome Bixby.

*Send for these outstanding
pocketbook novels*

★ A. E. VAN VOGT

***The Weapon Shops of
Isher***

★ WILSON TUCKER

City In The Sea

NOW AVAILABLE

The first two titles in this new series of outstanding science fiction novels have attractive, eye-catching covers that are different to anything contemporary. Designed to appeal to a wide range of readership they introduce two already famous novels by outstanding authors who have long specialised in this type of literature.

Nova Novels are of high quality production and will form the foundation of an ideal pocketbook library of famous books.



160 **2/-** PAGES
EACH

★

**POST FREE FROM
THE PUBLISHERS**

NOVA PUBLICATIONS

DERWENT HOUSE, 2, ARUNDEL STREET, LONDON, W.C.2.

Another famous Nova Magazine

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

128 pages Monthly 2/-

presents in the current November issue (No. 40) the final instalment of a new book-length novel by the popular author of **WILD TALENT**

THE TIME MASTERS

By WILSON TUCKER

Equally at home with the mystery novel as with science fiction the author has neatly contrived the best ingredients of both to produce yet another story of Today, full of suspense and intrigue and interwoven with considerable factual data. Basically it concerns the intense search for the missing wife of a prominent atomic scientist—a woman whose past is as mysterious as that of the investigator following her trail. Not yet scheduled for any other form of publication in Great Britain this is one more Nova serial you will not want to miss.

ORDER FROM YOUR NEWSAGENT

NOVA PUBLICATIONS

DERWENT HOUSE, 2 ARUNDEL ST., LONDON, W.C.2.